

The
WOLFER

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NIVEN

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McCLELLAND
& STEWART

FREDERICK NIVEN

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By FREDERICK NIVEN

**Author of "Hands Up!" "The
Lost Cabin Mine," etc.**

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Author of "Hands Up!" "The Lost Cabin Mine," etc.



TORONTO

McCLELLAND & STEWART

1923

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EPISTLE DEDICATORY

To:

Richard Bullock Esq. (alias "Deadwood Dick").

SIR: It was with a pang that I noted, some time ago, in a daily paper, the following brief lines: "Richard Bullock, the original 'Deadwood Dick,' has died in a California sanatorium, at the age of 75. He was of Cornish birth."

I know little, sir, of your life in actuality; but your life in fiction had, in my youth, a great charm for me. Reading of your departure from these glimpses of the moon and the big timber I felt a pang. It was, perhaps, to be frank, as much of regret for these days of my youth when I found happiness, forgetful of school, trigonometry, the strap, the cane, in following your alleged tracks through the Black Hills, as regret, for your sake, that you could no longer smell the balsam. For the great point of your life to me was that you smelt the balsam as well as the odour of gunpowder. Mr. James Branch Cabell (a certain "writing sharp") has written in one of his moods in which I like him that books "confound the restrictions of geography and the almanac." He goes on thus: "In consequence, from the Ptolemies to the Capets, from the twilight of a spring dawn in Sicily to the

uglier shadow of Montfauçon's gibbet, there intervenes but the turning of a page, a choice between Theocritus and Villon. From the Athens of Herodotus to the Versailles of St. Simon, from Naishapur to Cranford, it is equally quick travelling. All times and lands that ever took the sun, indeed, lie open, equally, to the explorer by the grace of Gutenberg; and transportation into Greece or Rome or Persia or Chicago, equally, is the affair of the moment. Then, too, the islands of Avalon and Ogygia and Theleme stay always accessible and magic casements open readily upon the surf of Seacoast Bohemia."

What you were I do not know, but the man who wrote romances for us boys around your life—he surely had "the savvy." To him thanks; he gave us a way of escape even while the weals of punishment were still large on our wrists. To you also I feel that the good God may give a vicarious benediction. I have lately been reading novels for grown-ups instead of for boys. They mostly bore me. Too much petticoats in them, Deadwood! The puffs about them read like this: "Deals with the relations of man and wife and the struggle between the sexes that characterizes our day." Or they are about "the feminine lure and modern passion." Modern passion! What do you know? as they say in the Black Hills. Bored stiff with these masterpieces and mistresspieces I wrote this book, partly for money to pay for the feed of my wife, my horses, myself, and partly for fun. If where you are you can read our earthly print, this book may please you. I think you and

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the Wolfer, meeting on the trail, could sit on your heels for an hour yarning, while your horses tore grass behind. And the scenes in which my story is laid will give you again the blue and green dusks of the big timber with sunshafts sweeping through; give you the smell of tamarack and fir and that eternal music of the creeks, the meaning of which, your sins forgiven, now perhaps you know.

I am, sir,

Yours faithfully,

FREDERICK NIVEN..

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THE WOLFER

THE WOLFER

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST RUMOUR OF "THE GOOD-ENOUGH"

YOU have all doubtless seen a good deal in the papers recently about the Good-Enough Mine, and perhaps know that there is a queer story about it. The statistics regarding assay, and the like, the financial editors have discussed. This is the story of it (the sheer story of it apart from statistics and technicology) by one who knows about all of it that is to be known.

A beginning may best be made with the eighth day of August in the year of grace (if it can be called of grace in view of some things that befell) 1920, in the Rocky Mountain town of Jaffery; and with John Fiske, aged twenty-five, or thereby, lately from Boston, with dreams of the future in the New West, sitting on the veranda of the Rossland Hotel (Prop: J. Donovan, as it said on the shingle over the door), just staring in front of him.

He was brought from his staring by that

"Prop"—Mr. Donovan—sitting down beside him heavily and commenting: "Well, that's over. Got time for a little bit of rest. I'm corpulent, I am, but it ain't through lack of work. I'm corpulent because I don't worry. Couldn't get a pair of reach-me-down pants in town to fit me. Got to go and get made to measure; but there's a drummer from 'Cisco here, dropped off at Jaffery by accident, him having met a bootlegger on the cars. Got it into his head this was Denver, Colorado. Had an old friend in Denver thought he'd call on. Queer effect tanglefoot can have on a fellow. Providence is in everything. One man's loss is another man's gain. He's kind of sober now, and he tells me his firm of reach-me-down pants-makers has my girth measurement. It's a lesson to me. I was beginning to worry about that—paying for made-to-measure. Now I'm fixed. You, now, look as if you were worrying."

John Fiske focussed his eyes from distant to near gaze, and glanced at the comfortable—the more than comfortable—jowl of Prop Donovan.

"I can't get a job," said he.

"Well, that shouldn't worry you. Rest! Rest!" and Donovan felt one plump hand with the other.

“And who’s to pay the board?” asked Fiske, in a tone almost indignant.

“True,” agreed Donovan after a long pause, and he gave a wheezy sigh. “True. And that brings one to the matter of worry. Now, young man, I’ll tell you those—”

He paused and Fiske, wondering what “those” might be, waited.

“Worry won’t get you a job,” Donovan brought out, like a large oracle.

John sighed. He had somehow hoped for advice of value.

“You’re too thin, young man,” said Donovan. “You worry. You look to me as if you lay awake at night worrying, now I come to study you.”

“I lie awake wondering how I’m to pay you,” Fiske admitted.

Donovan turned his head slowly and gazed at him.

“I ain’t worrying,” he said. “There used to be a man like you on Donovan Street—named for me—the street, I mean—and he walked up and down so much all night that he disturbed his neighbour. Wore heavy shoes he did. So his neighbour says: ‘What in thunder you walk up and down all night for like that?’ and the fellow says: ‘I’m worried.’ So the neighbour asks him: ‘What about?’ Says the fel-

low: 'I owe Jones the butcher, and MacPherson the grocer about five hundred dollars between them.' Says the neighbour: 'Why don't you let them do the walking? They ain't got any close neighbour to disturb anyhow, walking in the night up and down. Let Jones walk. Let MacPherson walk a bit.' Well, sir, I don't see where your worry comes from. You can skip. I can't. I've got the hotel. You've only got a valise. Man, you're crazy."

And then his eyes bulged in a certain direction. Fiske looked to see what had caught his attention, but there was nothing of importance to be seen—only a heat-haze shaking over the dusty western street, only a grasshopper ricocheting in that heat-haze.

"I got an idea," said Donovan. "Why don't you go and find the Good-Enough?"

"Good-Enough. Anything would be good-enough for me just now if there was a hundred dollars a month in it."

"O man. If you got the Good-Enough you'd get a hundred dollars a minute according to accounts. But maybe they're exaggerated, like the size of the fish that slipped the hook."

"What on earth is the Good-Enough?" John asked.

Donovan slightly slackened his belt, wheezed, and said:

“There you are. Worrying so much over your affairs—a paltry matter of fifty dollars a month to me—that you fogs your mind to not hearing about the Good-Enough. The Good-Enough is—”

But at that moment he did notice something in front of him that stopped his speech. Fiske looked again in the direction of the hotel proprietor's gaze and saw, coming strolling along through the shimmering heat-haze, a lean dark man with the twisted thighs of a rider, slow, leisurely movements, an erect but very loosely carried back, a sad expression, and a pair of spectacles. The spectacles seemed wrong—an anomaly. Donovan met the lithe man's slow gaze.

“How do, Walt?” he said.

“How do, Prop?” responded the man called Walt.

Everybody called Donovan “Prop”—because of the legend on the shingle over his door.

Walt strolled on down the street.

“Don't he just project himself along?” asked Donovan. “That ain't walking. That's dallying along, wishing there was a hoss to ride. He ain't nacherally of the mining country. He belongs to the high-saddle belts of this continent.”

“Who is he?” said Fiske.

“That? He’s a Man. Can’t you see that? Did the spectacles fool you?”

“O no.”

“O no. That’s right. He got to wear them for eye strain occasioned by looking along the sights of rifles so much. Big-game hunter and guide he was originally, and before that—an earlier originally, so to speak—he was a game-warden, and before that a hoss-breaker, and before that a cow-puncher. But the occupation that naturally got him his name, or as they say his soubriquet, was shooting up wolves on the plains. You’ll hear folks call him Walt the Wolfer that don’t know what the name means. Things change in the west rapidly. He ain’t an old man by a long way but he can remember well when he was a wolfer. They used to pull down calves a whole lot. Sheep was out of the question then in lots of parts. There was a bounty on wolves and he was one of the wolfers as they call them. Walt the Wolfer! Some name! A gentleman in Galena called him ‘Four-eyes’ once, in tones of contempt, and without the necessary smile of affection, and he shot him for familiarity. He don’t like familiarity.”

“No!”

“Well, so they say. He’s a man of the kind these there legends gather around. His life

ought to be written before it gets mixed up with hearsay. But say!” He put out a hand and touched Fiske’s sleeve. “You want to get on to this here Good-Enough business. He’s mixed up in it, but he don’t seem to be in a hurry to act. There’s your chance.”

“Where?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Donovan. “Come inside. I’ll tell you inside. I hate settin’ here talking. Somebody might be in the room above and come to the window behind. That’s the worst of summer-time and mosquito-net in all the windows.” He lowered his voice. “I don’t want to get mixed up in this here Good-Enough. A hotel is good-enough for me. I don’t want, for all the Eldorados, and Goleondas, and Ophirs, and Eurekaes, to go butting around into lost mines and disputed claims and that kind of thing. But if you want to pay me that fifty dollars—come inside. I’ll tell you. I’ll put you wise—or as wise as I am.”

CHAPTER TWO

MORE ABOUT "THE GOOD-ENOUGH"

IT was as they were slinking—for that was Donovan's air despite of his great rotundity, and Fiske, to rear, felt that he imitated the proprietor's manner—toward the rear of the house that a very small woman, a third of Donovan's size, and a quarter of his thickness, suddenly, with a voice like that of a fish-hawk, arrested them thus:

"Shame upon you, Don."

Proprietor Donovan stood still like a great keg and stared at her.

"And in prohibition too. No respect for the law. No respect for youth," ejaculated the little lady.

"What's the trouble, ma?" asked Proprietor Donovan.

"I saw you stepping into that bootlegger's room this morning," the lady addressed as "Ma" replied.

"Now this has got to be cleared up," said Donovan, in his mellowest accents. "What bootlegger?"

“Why, they threw him off the train. Number ten room. Don’t act as if you ain’t intelligent.”

“You’re too intelligent, ma. You’re so intelligent that you call all the wrong evidence and make a case when they’re ain’t one. Here have you been going on and on about the hole in my pants, and at the same time kicking about the price I got to pay—”

“Cut it out, Don. That ain’t relevant.”

“It sure is. I wanted to surprise you with a new pair of pants not made-to-measure. Number ten ain’t a bootlegger; he’s a pants firm representative. He got off the train of his own account, or because of Providence wanting to give you a surprise. And here you go spoiling it. He was taking my measurements for to put on his books so that any time I want a suit all I got to do is to get samples of colour and texture of ready-made garments and that’s what I was doing in his room.”

“Say, you can spin it all right. But that ain’t good enough.” At the same time she looked, by her expression, as though half convinced that it was for no surreptitious dram that Fiske was sneaking rearward with her husband.

“Good enough!” said Donovan. “Now, now. We don’t want to get side-tracked with

domestic asperity and false cumulative evidence that gives a man the name of bootlegger when he's only a pants maker. I ain't got anything on my hip, honour bright, ma. Spank and see." He caught her chin between his fingers and she smiled up at him. "I want to have a heart to heart talk with Mr. Fiske here in the way you told me you wanted to. That's all."

He opened the door of the private sitting-room where a stuffed golden eagle hung by a wire from the roof, and a mule-tail deer's head, moth spotted, gazed with glassy eyes at the enlarged portrait of Ma—all day long in that little box of a room hardly ever occupied.

Donovan's weight made the big chair in which he sat creak ominously every time he moved, and his attitude in it was one of readiness to come to his feet and save a fall if it utterly broke down under him; but that may have been an attitude assumed apart from the chair because he did not feel entirely at home in this centre of the home. He was always more at ease out in the big room styled "Rotunda" where were strong chairs that the heaviest man could tilt, and cuspidors, and specimens of ore lying on the window-ledges, and a clinging odour of tobacco-smoke.

"Did you ever see a fellow around here with grey eyes?"

Fiske had seen many and paid no special attention to them. He opened his own eyes wide and made no reply.

“O you’ll know what I mean when you see him,” said Donovan. “There’s something about the greyness of them.”

This seemed still vague, and Fiske’s mind strayed. He thought of Shakspeare’s “a grey eye or so.” His gaze drifted out of the window. He wondered what on earth he was in that little room for, and considered the mouldy deer-head, the hanging eagle, the enlarged photograph of Ma, noted also a pair of child’s slippers under a glass case on a corner table, thought at first they were moccasins, then wondered what they were for. Perhaps some day he would know why. Then he thought he must certainly be appearing to be rather rudely absent from his host, and looked at him again—to find that Donovan was considering him with a great concentration in his gaze.

“Yes, my lad,” said Donovan, a new note in his voice, oddly friendly, “you listen. You got to know the beginning of the story. I got a hope, if not a hunch, you may get some more of the story for yourself. This man I tried to describe by beginning with his grey eyes: you’ll see him going around town with a walking-stick—carved it himself out of an ordinary branch.

He looks with them eyes of his at everybody, as if he was taking a special note of them—with a purpose. He looks at them as keen as Chief Loney does—you know Loney, Chief of Police. But he looks at them like,” he dropped his voice, “a crook instead of a straight man. My belief about him of the grey eyes—Larry Shanks—is that he is so crooked that he couldn’t lie in bed straight. He’s too astute to be what they call a bad actor, but when he does act bad he’ll be a Bad Actor all right. He’s an alleged prospector now, and how he lives I don’t know. Most times he’s around town playing poker in the back of the Gink Cigar Store. He don’t talk much. He ain’t sociable, although he sits into the game.

“He came into town a little while back with a man he’d picked up in the mountains—not in the slang sense of ‘picked up,’ but picked up sure thing, off the mountain side. This was poor old Adam Bush. He was too old to be out in the hills alone. He was getting to the age of shaky knees, pretty near done, old Adam, but it seemed he just had to go on prospecting. The life had got hold of him. Larry found him, he said, fallen forward and moaning beside the Seven-Up road. He carried him to the roadside, and then who should come down it but this Wolfer and his partner. Guess you ain’t

seen his partner. He ain't around much. Commonly called Bunt—Bunt Bradley. That's what he's called, though Bunt ain't his name. Walt and Bunt were coming riding along with a string of pack-ponies. That was the job brought Walt the Wolfer into this section; he was packing supplies up to the government cartographers that were surveying the mountains up there. He guided them in from the other side, but as they worked along he reckoned it easier to break a trail down out this way for supplies. He belongs over on the ranges by nature and by his twisted thighs, and by his big-four hat. They got the moribund man upon one of their pack-ponies, and Larry Shanks he rode on another pack-pony, and so they came stringing into town on the Seven-Up road. That's the Seven-Up road right there.” He bent forward, making the chair creak, and pointed a plump finger. “You see it comes in right here. Poor old Adam Bush, tied to the pack, groans so badly right here that Walt reins in, and says to me (I was settin' on the veranda): ‘I think we'd better carry him into your house.’ Larry, behind, says: ‘No, get him along to the hospital.’ The hospital bluff looked a long ways further to tote a man groaning like that and it just happened that at that precise moment Doc Rose came hiking along the

side-walk opposite. He saw there was something wrong and over he came, and Larry says: 'We're just taking this man to the hospital, Doc.' The doc looked at that face of poor old Adam sagging down, and the look on his face was as good as if he said: 'You'll never get him further.' Then Ma came out and said: 'My goodness!' And I looked at her and said: 'Will we?' and she says: 'Sure!' and so I says: 'Take him in number six.' He was a heavy man for his years and everybody lent a hand and carried him in, and kind of clustered while the doc examined him. Says the doc: 'He's had a knock on the temple,' and Larry says: 'I saw that when I found him. Guess he fell on a rock.' Ma got sick with the sound of cutting his hair, and the scissors going 'zzzz' through a strip of lint, and one thing and another, and she says: 'I got to help or I'll sure faint. If I am holding a sponge it will keep me up, but looking on I can't do.' The doc looked around at her just in time to see her go off in a faint before I could give her anything to hold. So I carried her out and laid her on the bed, and looked for some smelling salts, and of course there weren't none; and then I went out and gathered two-three moulted feathers in the chicken-run, and came back and lit them so they singed, and held them under

her nose. And when she came round again I told her everything was all right. Then I went back to see how the doc was making out. The doc sure looked worried. He'd done what he could, and Larry and Walt the Wolfer and Bunt were looking on. When I came in the doc was just arranging the pillows, putting the old man comfortable. So far as I knew he hadn't spoken till then.

“And then he did speak. As clear and distinct as a hale and hearty man he says, after a big sigh:

“‘That's good-enough!’ And then he gave a big stretch, another long and rejoicing sigh like a man finished a ticklish job, and the doc put his hand on his heart, took his wrist and held it, frowned, and then turned and looked at us. Dead! Yes. Adam Bush was through.

“‘That's good-enough,’ he said, and just died.

“Moribund was what the doc called him at the inquest; said he was moribund when he was brought into town, meaning half dead anyhow.

“Well sir, he had some ore in his pockets and we all thought we might as well show it to Fred Stand—the assayer—anyhow. And Fred had it assayed. Everything was kind of mixed up

then: coroner's inquest, Chief Loney going out to see the place where he was found, Fred assaying the specimens, the town band practising the dead march in Saul. Little Fred Stand was mighty quiet after he made that assay. When he's quietest, things are best. Doc Rose was the man he went to first with his assay card. The doc thought at first there must be something wrong.

" 'The finest assay I've read'; was what he said after considering it. 'Where's his prospect anyhow?'

"And that's the point—nobody knows. And it's the richest assay that Fred Stand has ever toted up or Doc Rose read on an assay sheet or any prospector around here dreamt of. And nobody is supposed to know where the prospect hole is. He didn't come in to register it. Some folks think these specimens were only floats he'd picked up and that he hadn't found the lode. Other folks think he was on his way in to town to register when he fainted and others think he was coming in just sick. He was awful old, too old to be out in the hills alone. But do you know what I think?"

"No," said Fiske, staring.

"I think somebody knows."

"O!"

"Yep. One of those three men know—

Larry Shanks or Walt Dewar or Bunt Bradley. Or they all know. Don't look at me enquiring that way. I know no more than I tell you. What happened on the road in with what the coroner called the moribund body of Adam Bush I don't know. I got the notion he spoke earlier—before he said: ‘That's good-enough!’ and just naturally died. These fellows know something. Why, a man with a cork eye could see that!”

“I don't want to appear to argue, sir,” said young Fiske. “What I've to say is just because I've been following all this with interest.”

“Say on, my boy.”

“If they all know where this rich prospect is why don't they go out all together and re-stake it? While they are staying here some one might go and find it.”

“O, Larry of the queer eyes would play dog-in-the-manger every time. He wouldn't go shares with any one if he's the only one who knows. I guess he's scared to start in case he's followed by Walt and Bunt. If Walt and Bunt know where it is and start out then Larry Shanks will quit playing dog-in-the-manger. That's what I think.”

Such were Donovan's guesses; they came near the truth but he did not know all and so missed it. However, he went on:

“As for others that don’t have any notion where it is going and looking for it—what’s the use? Did you ever look at the mountains to say nothing of going up into them? Why, just on one hump of mountain that you can see from this here window you could walk for a week. Gulches and draws and hog-backs! They all look like one big mountain from a distance, but they’re a maze of that sort of thing—gulches and cañons and draws and hog-backs, big timber and second-growth and sure jungle. A straight line of ten miles by map might take you anything from two to four days to get through in places.”

A drawling voice, at that moment, came to their ears. Donovan bent, and peered out of the window.

“Look,” said Donovan. “There they are again—or there he is again—Walt the Wolfer and his partner, Bunt Bradley.”

Through the mosquito-net Fiske looked and saw that lithe swinging back, that dallying walk. By the side of Dewar walked another man, a little heavier, with more of swagger instead of ease, but not excessive swagger, a manner of buoyancy. In some way that he could hardly describe Fiske felt drawn to them. Looking back at that moment, later, he wondered if what he felt then was premonition. In that retro-

spect it seemed that then he knew—knew—he would become acquainted with them. But of what he would do and see and get to know of them he had surely no premonition.

“If I am any judge of a human being’s back,” said Donovan, “despondency ain’t the outstanding mood of Mr. Bunt this day. Walt Dewar don’t ever walk but in that slow projectin’ fashion; he don’t express his varying feelings in his gait. Always like that. Just projectin’ along, kind of as if he wondered why in heck he hadn’t a hoss to ride and save his legs, as I always think. Bunt mostly has that cheerful I-don’t-care-if-it-snows carriage to him; but he looks to me kind of extra easy to-day, and it ain’t a poker player’s bluff. Look at him. Don’t he fairly exude: ‘Everything is going fine and dandy!’?”

Fiske looked. And as he looked Donovan went on:

“I tell you those! A big fat hotel proprietor, fat through not worrying, rather than because of the eats, can see things. He just sits and observes and thinks—and don’t worry. That’s me. Comin’ Hannah! Comin’ Hannah!” he suddenly ended on a high note, for his little wife’s voice hailed him. “Comin’ Hannah!” he called again rising.

As they came to the door of the little private

parlour where their talk had taken place, he said: "Now you want to go and scout around town and try to get more news than I can give you about this here peradventure prospect. There ain't nobody going out to look for it. You're practically a stranger. If only you could get some kind of inkling whereabouts it is! If you went away to look for it they'd think you'd only quit because you couldn't get a job. Comin' Hannah!"

Donovan had got to the door, Fiske beside him. He suddenly put a hand kindly on the young man's shoulder, glanced over to the glass case under which were the baby's slippers, and stood a moment as if pondering something else. Then he opened the door. There was Hannah.

"Sorry to interrupt you," she said, "but the Chink cook says he won't bake blueberry pie—only loobab today. We got all them blueberries, and—"

"I'll just explain to him. Mr. Fiske, excuse me. I guess he don't understand your way of expression, Hannah," and together proprietor and proprietor's wife—"Prop" and "Ma"—departed towards the kitchen quarters.

CHAPTER THREE

LISTENING TO THE BAND

FISKE felt happier that evening than he had felt since coming to Jaffery hopeful only to find that the boom of the town exceeded the apparent possibilities. Perhaps the blueberry pie helped to make him comfortable—for there was blueberry pie to finish supper. The Chink had evidently understood that it was definitely wanted when Donovan explained what his wife failed to explain.

The vision of Walt Dewar and Bunt Bradley was before his mind's eye as if fixed on the retina. He strolled on Dewdney street (named after the celebrated old West trail maker, the main street of Jaffery) and certainly the telepathic waves there were all of cheerfulness. Victrolas sang and trumpeted and orchestraed in the stores and cafés and restaurants. All manner of races were represented. There were big slow Scandinavians and little volatile Italians. There were Americans of the big round-spectacled, slow, ponderous manner, and lean ones with long noses. There were men in

lumber-jack boots and prospectors' boots, and men in narrow-toed low shoes. An odour of cigar-smoke hung in the streets under the electric lamps—Jaffery had its own power plant like a good little western city with a power creek roaring over falls not a dozen miles away. Beyond the roofs the ranges of mountains changed in the coming dusk from separate hog-backs into a great blue wall, then a black silhouette.

At a corner, in a big automobile, a swarthy man, wearing a silk hat and frock coat, stood up grandly extolling the value, for all pains, of the contents of a bottle he held aloft to the view of a smiling crowd.

"Two bits. Two bits a bottle! That's good enough, gentlemen! Now don't run away. You are going to hear the great baritone from the East—Mr. Riccardo Evans—sing that ever memorable song, 'Way Down Upon de Swanee Ribber.' Mr. Riccardo Evans."

Up rose a tough-looking young man with a guitar.

"But before Mr. Evans sings let me talk to you about this bottle. It heals . . . wait a bit. When I've sold half-a-dozen Mr. Evans will sing that ancient and exquisite favourite 'Way Down Upon de—' how many? Yes sir. Thank you. Two bits. There! I've sold five. That's good enough. We'll have Mr. Evans and then

a little more about my tonic, and then a monologue by the celebrated electrocutionist—I mean elocutionist of the West, Signor John Smith. Now boys, just anybody else want a bottle before Mr. Evans sings that beautiful ballad of Way Down? Thank you. Thank you. That's good enough. Now Mr. Evans, please."

Mr. Evans rose and thrummed on the strings.

It was the re-iteration of the phrase "good enough" that chiefly stuck in John Fiske's mind. If only he could make as much money in half-an-hour as this comfortable gentleman in the big automobile with the two hilarious entertainers, one on each side of him, then he could pay his hotel bill. Good enough! The lost prospect was called the Good-Enough! But perhaps there wasn't any prospect! Donovan had told him that some people were of the opinion that old Adam Bush had only picked up floats and not found the mother-lode. He paused to hear Mr. Riccardo Evans sing, but as he had none of the pains told of by the silk-hatted gentleman afterwards, and as it seemed the bottle of elixir was to be lugged in frequently before the singer could get a start, he moved on—moved on with the words "good enough" echoing in his ears.

There is in most towns, perhaps it may be said especially in the west, a hotel that is treated

much as a club as well as a hotel. In Jaffery it was the Tremont. People not boarding there used to come and sit in its rotunda in winter, and on the seats along its veranda and the seats along the side-walks before it on summer evenings. One row of chairs, close to the veranda, on the side-walk, was allowed by Chief Loney, who had many cigars free from the proprietor. There was always some little attraction at that hotel—the Tremont. On this especial evening it was a little orchestra, “rustled together” by some lover of music. They sat at the veranda end with paper caps on their heads, playing rag-time, big moths veering and spinning over them in the blaze of a special reflector-backed light that shone down upon their music-sheets on the music-stands.

Fiske came to rest here on a vacant chair. The music was not solacing; it was elating! It told him not to worry, that he’d get a job all right. Jaffery had boomed a little bit too suddenly; that was all. It was a little overcrowded; that was all.

A strong odour of what seemed to be in the nature of whisky, but wasn’t, caused him to turn his head, and he saw, sitting beside him, a man with such queer grey eyes, crazy grey eyes, that he felt a shudder. With a look of amazing calculation for one so odoriferous, he of the

grey eyes was considering Fiske. But when their eyes met the grey eyes immediately bleared, blurred, the keen scrutiny was no longer evident.

"This," thought John, "is for a certainty Larry Shanks."

"Pleasant evening, stranger," said Larry, and as he spoke he moved slightly, in such a way that John noted a walking cane with carved knob and carvings also on the stem as it rested on his knees.

"Yes," replied Jack, monosyllabic because of a feeling of intense revulsion that Larry Shanks caused in him.

"Early days here it was different," said Larry. "We got gold-washings on the bars in the creeks and whisky—real whisky—over the bars in the saloons. Shucks!"

Why the ejaculation Jack did not know, unless perhaps it was disgust at the change.

"Didn't have to play poker in a back-room," said he of the mad grey eyes. "Shucks!"

That was an ejaculation of deep disgust, caused by considerations regarding the difference between what is called a "closed" and a "wide-open" town.

At this point there came to the ears of both these men a voice that both knew. It caused Larry Shank's eyes to blaze a moment wildly;

then a blank look was in them again.

"Let's sit down and listen to the orchestra," came the voice.

It was the same that caused Donovan to look out of the window when telling of old Adam the prospector who died with a sigh of: "That's good-enough!" It was the voice of the slow, lean Walter Dewar the Wolfer from the Plains. The man to whom Dewar spoke was his companion of an earlier hour of the day, Bunt Bradley.

They sat down, and it came into Fiske's head that the party would all be complete if only the ghost of the dead prospector, Adam Bush, who perhaps owned a claim called, by others, The Good-Enough, was also present. Perhaps it was. Who knows?

CHAPTER FOUR

A REVOLVER SHOT

THE music ended, and it gave Fiske a start of astonishment to hear the Wolfer, in a low voice that yet carried to the leader of the orchestra, enquire: "Could you let us have, as a change from 'Me-Mo-My Mexico' and 'Ga-Ga-Galveston Girls'—excellent in their way doubtless—a number of MacDowell, also excellent in its way?"

The leader of the orchestra stepped forward and bending towards the Wolfer said quickly and vehemently:

"It wouldn't go!"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Dewar. "You never know what the public will stand for till you try. Here is one member of the public wants a MacDowell number and," he turned his head, glanced towards Shanks, "there's some of them even want Chopin's *March Funebre*. It's coming to them."

The leader of the orchestra, scenting trouble (if trouble has a scent; or if that way of stating his feelings may pass), tripped backward to his

seat again. Shanks rolled his head round toward Walt the Wolfer.

"There ain't anything brilliant in talking French before a man that don't know it," he said.

Walter bowed.

"If I have transgressed a law of the courteous—I apologize," he said.

Anybody could have told, as the leader of the orchestra had realized, quickly retiring from its proximity, that trouble was brewing at the end of the veranda, that between Shanks and Dewar was cause of discord; that, to speak in symbol, there was a charring ember there and a little puff of wind might cause it to blaze up. A man sitting behind Walter, who had overheard (with a curious look and smile at the corners of his mouth) his request for MacDowell, bent forward and removing his cigar from his lips remarked:

"MacDowell seems kind of queer among the almighty mountains."

"Yes," said Dewar, nodding. "All music does. When one comes in from these almighty hills, as you call them, music does seem—queer. Even what old Sir Thomas Browne called 'vulgar and tavern music' *gets* one. Even 'Me-Mo-My Mexico' seems good against the mountains."

"I came in once out of the mountains," said the man who had spoken to Walt, "on a Sunday it was, and I tell you it was queer after the big cedars and the quiet of them to hear the voices chanting in a church as I rode past to the livery stable."

The Wolfer inclined his head courteously enough, but turned away again, as though, having replied to a casual remark, he had no desire to make a long conversation.

"It is sometimes a relief to get back out of the mountains and hear the music," the man went on, "so as to know that it's all real."

Dewar turned slightly and did not reply at once, but as the man remained sitting forward gazing at him he responded:

"This down here always seems to me more unreal than the mountains. They look as if they were made for ever. This here might vanish if you did this too hard," and he gave a puff of his breath.

"Well, the mountains are the making of a place like this," said the man. "Real-estate agents, carpenters, hotel-proprietors, store-keepers and all could go, if there was no wealth in the mountains."

That remark dispelled the slight dryness in the Wolfer's tones. He came alertly erect.

"There's wealth in the mountains all right,"

he agreed. "If it could only all be found then this boom of Jaffery wouldn't end in a fizzle like a damp rocket. This gentleman here knows about that." He nodded past Fiske toward Shanks.

"What do you mean by that?" growled Shanks.

"He's a prospector," Dewar explained to the man who had begun the conversation and, having got on to a certain line of conversation that gave the sort of opening Walt wanted, was going to be used as a cat's paw.

"Well I ain't struck anything to sing about yet," said Shanks. "One or two prospects, maybe, but assays not worth troubling."

"Not—struck—anything—yet?" said Dewar slowly, and too quietly for the man behind to hear.

Shanks leant across Fiske, and the odour of squirrel whisky was violent in Fiske's nostrils.

"Yes," growled Shanks, "have you struck anything?" he asked.

"Not on the head anyhow!" said Walt, and the man who had set the talk agoing looked worried a moment, puzzled.

"I've got a pretty good assay on a certain property," went on Walt, "but don't know if the assay is big enough, all the same, to warrant as many owners as might be forthcoming."

Shanks' grey eyes shone brightly as if a flame were lit within. His hands gripped fiercely on the carved knob of his stick. Fiske, with that face close to him, craning in front of him, so that he had to sit back, was horrified by its malignancy.

"We can cut out some of the prospective owners, then," said Shanks. "There's too many butters-in in the west now-a-days. We can cut out—"

His hand went around to his hip and when it came back the gleam of a short six-gun barrel was under Fiske's nose. That young man flicked his head back and thrust his hand forward in an impulsive gesture, knocking the gun, aimed past him, to one side. It went off with a loud report but with no flash, or volley of smoke, being no movie gun. There was only the slightly acrid odour of its smokeless powder. Everybody on the veranda leapt up. The orchestra stopped, and then the conductor's baton went tap-tap-tap. He had perhaps read of orchestra-leaders and bandmasters who saved the situation.

On went the music. It was a triumph for the orchestra-leader. Waving his baton he looked elated, delighted, standing gloriously puffed up; and who can blame him?

"What is it?"

“Who fired?”

“What was that?”

“Say, where did that gun go off?”

There was a criss-crossing of enquiries. Some people went indoors rapidly to be out of trouble. Others came rushing to the scene to discover what the trouble was, or if there was trouble, or an accident. The drunken Shanks, with the adroitness and brazen effrontery of the drunken, rose, strolled slowly away, turned the corner. When Fiske looked again at the Wolfer, that calm gentleman was sitting back in his chair, one leg over the other, the sad blank look in his eyes behind his spectacles. He looked almost demure. Bunt was sitting hunched forward, one elbow on a knee, looking upward at the gathering crowd with a perky, almost insolent expression. A stranger enquired of him: “Who fired?”

“Fired?” he asked.

“Yes. That shot.”

“Didn’t notice. Guess it was a cork blew out of a bottle. That moonshine stuff has a high explosive capacity, generates gas. If you puncture the cork you can use it instead of acetylene gas.”

Dewar chuckled deep in his chest but did not change his position of rest. Then stubby Chief Loney thrust through the crowd. He stood

looking from face to face, from one man to another.

“Who fired that shot?” he demanded; but no one had a word in response.

“Did you see it?” he asked of Bunt.

“Chief,” he replied. “I give you it straight that I saw neither smoke, nor flame, nor bullet.”

Dewar cleared his throat as if to speak and the Chief turned to him expectant; but it was only to Bunt he wanted to make a remark, and the remark was this:

“How often, Bunt, have I got to tell you that *either* and *neither* are for use only with two subjects? You can say you saw neither smoke nor flame, or you can say you saw neither bullet nor smoke; but you can’t say neither smoke nor flame nor bullet.”

Loney gloomed on him with an aspect that suggested that he was half inclined to arrest him upon some charge in the nature of contempt of court—although here was no court yet. Loney did not want to make a fool of himself. He contented himself by fixing in his mind’s eye the faces round him.

The proprietor had come out to see what was the cause of a six-gun shot arresting the orchestra for a few beats, and Chief Loney went marching indoors with him with a businesslike air.

The music ended.

"Say boys, that was fine!" sighed the leader. Dewar leaned towards him.

"It came pretty near a call for the *March Funebre*," he said.

People were puzzled. They looked at him curiously. Actually all had happened too quickly for a general observation.

"I didn't see what happened," said the orchestra-leader.

Music-sheets rustled. The baton tapped again and another gay number was echoed back from the black mountain opposite the town, till orchestra and echo could hardly be told one from the other by anybody at a little distance. Some places it seemed as if the mountain was playing!

Dewar turned to Jack Fiske.

"I believe you saved my life," he said. "I believe he would have fired all right. My name is Walter Dewar."

"Mine is John Fiske."

"Well, Mr. Fiske, I'm obliged to you. It maybe ain't much you've done for humanity generally, but it means a whole lot to me. You see—I don't know if there are horse-herds grazing in the meads of asphodel. It would be kind of lonesome to find oneself in a mead without a horse—only human-beings, or their ghosts."

Fiske, looking closely at the face, was struck by an expression upon it. For all the persiflage of this man's talk he was clearly grateful. And more, the very air of levity gave him something of mystery. He was not an ordinary man. Jack Fiske looked right into his eyes. Solemnly, steadily, a trifle sad, that gaze met his from behind the spectacles. Suddenly they twinkled with merriment. They sat there, saying no more till the concert on the veranda came to an end, and trombones, and flutes, and violins were packed away, and music stands taken down, and the crowd began to disperse. Jack rose to go.

"Good-night," said he.

"Good-night sir," said the Wolfer with a short bow. "Any time I can be of service to you Mr. Fiske . . . his voice tailed off. He inclined his head gravely.

As Jack moved away he heard various people talking of the sound of the shot. He heard round him: "Did you see?"—"That shot—what was it?"—"Say, what was that report?" Nobody seemed to know.

At the street corner, solid and reserved, as if looking at his boots, stood Chief Loney. Fiske wondered if he had discovered who had fired the shot. As he passed the chief he looked at him, and saw the eyes, under the shadow of

the hat, turn their gaze toward the Tremont veranda where Dewar had risen.

"Hullo, hullo," a voice accosted him, and he found Mr. Donovan rolling along by his side like a great keg on legs. Together they walked along Dewdney Street.

"What was this I've been hearing about some queer return to the old days of the wild and woolly?" asked "Prop" Donovan. "Who was it pulled a gun at the Tremont when the band was playing?"

"I did not see the smoke," Fiske replied. "I did not see the flame. And I certainly did not see the bullet."

Donovan's head turned slowly toward him.

"You were settin' there listening to the band, weren't you?"

"O yes."

"I thought so. Was it Larry Shanks? Did you see him? If you did you'd know him. Eyes! Such queer eyes."

"I saw him."

"Yep. I was standing on the corner here and I thought I saw you sitting next to what I thought was him. That big reflector light over the veranda on band nights kind of blinds one."

Fiske couldn't have explained even to himself why he did not give a definite reply; why he merely said:

"If it was Larry Shanks who fired nobody seemed to see. The Chief of Police came along and asked who had done it, if anybody had seen—and nobody could give any information."

"Huh!" said Donovan. "That was in keeping. That was like old times too. Why, I remember the first sheriff (county sheriff) that came to Jaffery, I can't say how many years ago. A deputation called upon him and explained that we could do without him, and that it wasn't a healthy neighbourhood for sheriffs, that he could look after the County and we could look after our City! So you didn't see who fired—or what for—or anything?"

"I did," said Fiske. It struck him, then, that he owed that much to Donovan who had been kind to him.

"But you don't want to speak. All right. But say, had it anything to do with the man I pointed out to you today? I'm just curious that much. If you want to keep quiet about it for any reason—of course you needn't say. I sure saw you nod good-night to Dewar when you rose. And I cannot mistake Dewar: When he turned I saw two twinkles in the glass of his specks. I ain't curious for detail, if you ain't talking; but that there matter of Shanks, and Dewar and Bunt, seeing I saw it pretty near at the beginning, when that poor old fel-

low Adam Bush was carried into my hotel, that there matter does interest me. I don't see how it can stand still. It's got to move. Had it anything to do with them?"

"It had."

"That'll do. I see you have reason for keeping mum. That will do to be going on with. I wondered. I wondered. That's good enough. I said to Hannah only this evening: 'I got a hunch that that there draw-poker manner—that even a man with a cork eye can see exists between the Wolfer and Larry Shanks—is going to get a hustle on it some day.' After you!" For they had reached the Rossland Hotel, standing back from the side-walk along a narrow plank tributary side-walk, broad enough only for two lean men to walk side by side.

"After you, sir," said Fiske, and as Donovan walked ahead of him a man came hurrying after them.

"Excuse me, sir," he called.

Jack turned and recognized Dewar's partner—Bunt.

"My partner, Walt Dewar, would be glad if you could slip down to the Occidental House tomorrow morning."

"What does he want me for?" asked Jack, mighty curious.

"O search me! About the hen's teeth, maybe! He'll tell you when he sees you."

With which cryptic remark Bunt marched on.

It had all taken only a second. The side-walk from the main side-walk to the veranda of the Rossland was still quivering from Donovan's rolling and weighty passage when Jack walked after him.

"About—the—hen's—teeth!" he thought. "Now what can that mean?"

Donovan looked at him thoughtfully.

"Ma want's me to give you a job so's you could get some money. Not because we're worrying, but because—well—she's got a reason for taking an interest in you. I cannot think up any job. I can only think of that Good Enough prospect. You seem to have made a move. Now don't worry about not telling me even though I put you wise. I ain't hurt a bit. I think you'd be wise, quite wise to keep mum to everybody."

Jack had a feeling that Donovan was hurt because of his muteness. And yet, for the moment at least, it seemed an impossibility for him to speak. He wondered why he felt this so strangely. He caught "Prop" Donovan's elbow.

"Say," he said. "I've got it."

"Got what?"

“Why I don’t want to speak. There’s nothing to talk of yet, but I’ve got a hunch that there will be. I’m not superstitious but I don’t like to—to—well, count the chickens before they’re hatched.”

“Fine! Fine!” said “Prop” Donovan. “I know the feeling. We won’t even talk about the hunch!”

CHAPTER FIVE

▲ ROOF CONFERENCE

BUNT'S phrase about "hen's teeth," Fiske was to discover, meant no more than that Bunt was a gentleman of aphorisms, cant phrases, the stereotyped quip, and an exterior of levity.

As for the Occidental Hotel: In Jaffery there were (there are, indeed) hotels, and hotels.

There was the Rossland, more like a large rooming house to all appearances, apart from the board that announced "Rossland Hotel, Prop: J. Donovan." There was the Tremont, with its veranda so large that it became a gallery more strictly speaking, and its rotunda all visible from the street. It looked almost as much like a club as a hotel.

There was the Occidental.

The Occidental had two narrow and tall doorways each up a flight of steps, set in from the front of the house. On either side of these doors were windows, but they were an opaque green for a distance above the street level, too high for any one, even tip-toeing, to see over.

At the very end there was a window that could be looked through, but heavy curtains hung there. The general effect of the Occidental was secretive and, to some minds, even sinister. The opaque windows suggested draw-poker, stud-poker, and faro, suggested perhaps discreet bootlegging to some. The heavy curtained one suggested people who wished to see without being seen. But it does not do, thought Jack, coming to the Occidental, to be suspicious. It was certainly, he decided, a different kind of hotel from either the Tremont or the Rossland. Which door should he go in by? So he wondered. If the Tremont looked like a club-house as much as a hotel this looked as much like the headquarters of a secret society as like a hotel, he mused, considering the doorways. What door, he asked himself, did one enter by? He felt a fool wandering from one to the other, trying to decide which was restaurant door, which the main door.

"I'll try this one anyhow," he said to himself and entered—to find a row of easy-chairs, each with a cuspidor to right, a tall clock on the wall, ticking away—and from a door to the rear Walter Dewar lolled into view, head back, a worried pucker on his brows. It reminded Fiske of the frown on the foreheads of lions in their cages at the Zoo.

"There you are. Good-morning, Mr. Fiske," said the Wolfer.

"Good-morning, Mr. Dewar," Jack replied.

They shook hands and then Dewar stood with head up, rubbing the under part of his chin with his finger-tips as though feeling whether he had cut himself in shaving. But he was not doing that really, was only thinking; he was only wondering where was a quiet place for a talk.

A Chinaman slithered past in the back of the room and to him Dewar spoke.

"Confucius," said he, "you savee Bunt—Mr. Bunt?"

"O yes."

"You catchum. You tell him one gentleman here to see him."

"All lightee."

The Chinaman disappeared again, as silently as he had come. Jack saw his skinny thin hand raise a heavy blue curtain hanging in a narrow and shadowed corridor.

Dewar said nothing, only continued to rub his chin and look at the room as if it puzzled him—its doorless doorway to rear draped by that heavy blue curtain, its flight of stairs corkscrewing upward in a corner through the ceiling, its six feet of counter with a registering book and a leaden ink-pot, but no clerk behind the

counter, its long hanging clock demurely ticking away.

"I like this place," said Dewar suddenly. "There's a spirit hanging around here in touch more with horses and pack-saddles and discussing trails than in touch with automobiles and people coming in to discover the opportunities for opening a jewellery store or an afternoon tea café."

So that was how the Occidental appeared to the Wolfer! We each see the same thing a little differently maybe!

The curtain swung again and Bunt appeared. He nodded gaily and grinned like a school-boy who had been up to some prank.

"How do?" he said cheerily.

"How do?" said Jack.

"Where can we talk?" asked Dewar.

"We'd disturb dice in the front room and faro in the second; the third is locked, so I don't know whether it's seven-up or casino. What's the matter with the roof?"

Jack thought at first this was a nonsensical remark, in the same verbal world as that one about "hen's teeth"; but Dewar looked pleased.

"Dandy notion," he said. "Let us mount."

He stepped to the corkscrew stairs and led the way. Jack was standing back to let Bunt

go next, but that young man stepped back and putting a hand on his heart bent in an exaggerated bow and said: "Apres vows. You see I have not forgotten my Latin."

It was more of excess of spirit than utter "freshness." Jack followed Dewar and Bunt came up behind. They reached a landing where was no sound but the click, muffled behind a door, of billiard balls. They passed along a corridor and went up another flight of steps and along a passage where a pail had been left at one dark corner and a broom at another.

"Why," enquired the Wolfer, "do they always leave these things at such places?"

They mounted a third flight of stairs that led to the top ceiling level, up on a line with the transoms of the top-story bed-rooms, and there Dewar opened a door like a ship's companion-way. The full sunlight of morning blazed outside and a wind plucked the cream-coloured scarf round his neck. He stepped out on to a flat roof, holding the door with backward-flung hand till Jack and Bunt had followed. The roof was covered with sheets of lead. A low parapet ran all round, and ventilation tubes and chimneys irregularly thrust up beside them. Looking over they saw the hats of people in town and their feet moving in and out under

the hats. Downward it was a bird's-eye view. All round was a view of the mountains, hog-backs, and draws, pencilling of far summit firs and glinting distant outcrops of rocks up against the tremendous sweep of sky.

Dewar looked round the scene, drawing a tobacco-pouch from his hip pocket and slowly, with absent expression, filling his pipe. Then he sagged down into an easy squatting attitude on his heels. Bunt sank down similarly, and Fiske followed suit, cross-legged like a tailor beside them.

Dewar lit his pipe and then said he:

"I'm going to put a proposition to you, Mr. Fiske. You did me a good turn last night, and so I'm going to ask another of you today."

"What's that?" broke out Bunt, all the gaiety ebbed abruptly from him. "That ain't what you said to me."

"It amounts to the same thing," said Dewar, looking sadly at Bunt. "It's only a different way of phrasing it. Let me explain. You see, Mr. Fiske, Bunt Bradley and I are both a little bit queer, like most human beings. You must have read, if you've never heard, how the mountains can affect men. Two men alone in the mountains, unless the same God—if I may put it so—guides them, are not comfortable. Two men alone can be lonelier than one. Got that?"

"I can understand it," said Fiske gazing at him steadily.

"It's well known," said Dewar. "Look at Dakota when it brought in its law about sheep-herders—that no sheep-herder must go out alone. Too many of them went batty, you see. It was an excellent law, but it was kept an excellent law by a boss having some horse sense in his pairing off of men to go out together. The best combination I ever saw was once down there. It was a herder and his wife and their papoose, and they had a canary in a cage hanging in the door of their caravan."

"The woman wouldn't like the winter," said Bunt.

"No I guess not," replied Dewar, pressing the tobacco down in the bowl of his pipe. Nor would the canary. No sir; nor would the canary!" He sat puffing his pipe without more words for a few moments and then said he: "Well, anyhow, here's the idea. Here's the basis for my proposition. Bunt Bradley and I, Mr. Fiske, don't want to go out into the mountains alone. It may sound foolish to you, but—"

"It's the mountains," said Bunt, and Jack noticed he was staring away off at them with a glum face. The look of annoyance that had flashed up a moment before was gone; but gone

also was that hilarity of aspect that had seemed to Jack, on earlier glimpses, typical of Bunt.

"I've read of how they affect some men," said Jack. "And I think I can understand it."

"I can't understand it!" ejaculated Dewar. "It gets my goat. I lose my temper up there with men I quite like in town. Then I get mad at myself. Emotion! Emotion! Some day I'm going to cut out emotion! Bunt doesn't understand it. But he certainly feels it. I give way to it quickly and he holds my temper down. Then when all's well he gets to hating me and everything. For Bunt's sake will you make a three-some of a two-some party? We intended, Bunt and I, to make a little expedition up into the almighty and eternal mountains."

"For—your—sake—too!" growled Bunt.

Where was the gay and cheerful Bunt gone? Jack wondered. What a scowling Bunt was this, staring at the mountains that encircled them!

"We are going out to do a little prospecting—of sorts. We think you, as a newcomer here, won't talk. We're willing to give you a hundred a month and grub for the trip."

There was a candour in his eyes that Fiske desired to reciprocate.

"You're going out after the Good Enough, I suppose," he said.

Bunt's jaw tightened and he turned in a slow way like that of a mastiff and gloomed at Jack.

"Who told you?"

"It's only a guess," said Jack. "I've heard gossip about it."

He met Bunt's gaze unflinchingly. They sat so facing each other for a definite long interval, the Wolfer sitting considering them with a twinkle in his eyes behind his big round spectacles.

"We'll make out all right, I guess," said Bunt, and held out his hand; and it struck Jack that Bunt was very much a primitive young man, of wild emotions, irresponsible. He had a private thought, which was this: "What was the bond that held two men, so different, together?" That he might discover. For the moment there was, to look at the matter calmly, without any flutter of excitement over the quality of adventure in the affair, the material fact of "a job" and a hundred dollars a month and food.

"I'll go with you—certainly," he said when Bunt released his hand after that impulsive hand-shake, and turning to make the remark to Dewar as the obvious chief.

"All right," said Dewar. And then Fiske had evidence that there might be two sides to this story of incompatibility of temperament

for, with a fleering note in his voice, said Dewar: "Is the solemn ritual of a hand-shake necessary between us also?" He turned to Bunt and said: "O humanity! Hand-shakes and squabbles! Asseverations of undying affection—and then, phut! All over! The little rift within the lute!"

Bunt sat back and beamed.

"So long as you say your darned unpleasant remarks in a high-falutin manner they don't fizz on me. I know you're jeerin' but I don't catch the full blast. I ain't no darn Harvard high-brow."

Dewar knocked out his pipe.

"High-brow and low-brow," he said, "we all have feelings. Cut 'em out! Cut 'em out! Well, Mr. Fiske, you're practically coming with us to keep the peace, as it is evident to you, and I'll call you John now, or would you rather have Jack? Guess John will do to begin," he said before Fiske could reply. "If all goes well it will be 'Jack' by the time we get back again. Yes, you're practically to keep the peace, and I'll do my best. From now on I'll cut out the high-brow aspersion stuff to the best of my ability, and Bunt there—he'll cut out the low-brow."

"O me!" ejaculated Bunt. "If I got a trouble with a man I just call him straight

out a son of a gun and hit. That's me."

"Well," said Dewar, "now we understand each other all round."

With a smile he held out his hand, after all, to Fiske, who took it and pressed it.

They rose.

"You have blankets?" asked Dewar.

"I—eh—I can get them," said Fiske.

"Otherwise you haven't; you're broke. All right. I'll see to blankets for you. Can you be at the City Livery Stables after lunch—one thirty?"

"Yes."

"All right."

They stood there on the roof, gazing down at the hats below, and the feet coming and going under them, and at the mountains; and then, in order of their ascent, descended again. In the room at the bottom with the tick-tocking clock Dewar said again: "All right—one thirty. City Livery Stables," and turned away.

Fiske went out into the street and as he closed the door behind him he expected for a moment to waken from a dream with the click of the latch. But he didn't. It was not a dream. It was true. Fiske had to assure himself it was all true and not a dream. Later he might have to assure himself it was not a nightmare—in those mountains looming round him. The dif-

ficulty of assuring himself he did not dream was increased by reason of the scene being so unlike home. Everything was different. No electric cars made a base of noise for the general noise. The vista of Dewdney Street was but brief, and ended in a view like a back-drop for a Wild West show, amazingly clear. Yes, it was more like that—a painted scene, than a scene into which one could walk and be lost, perhaps, among these millions of trees upon the great slopes. They were individually clear, but no man ever tried to count those even in one draw or upon one clear hog-back. Whiffs of odours on the street were not of cigarettes and blent cosmetics and petrol. A wind blowing down off the mountains sent a river of balsam scent trickling robustiously along Dewdney Street. The strains of a Victrola warbling “Galveston Girls,” in some way he could not at first understand, added to the unreality. That was what the Wolfer had talked of on the veranda of the Tremont the prior night. With the expedition looming before him he well understood the feeling that Walt and the stranger had discussed. The music had helped to make all Jaffery like a city in an exposition, a show. These men in their long prospectors’ boots were made to seem actors on a stage all the more because of the music.

A man rode past on a high-saddled horse, leading two other ponies, one with a pack-saddle on it. The air of "Galveston Girls" was left behind as he walked on and there came to his ears bars from a record of a Sousa March. That did it. The music, a high-saddled horse—obviously it was not a dream, but a show! Then he noted more than the prancing, wheeling and nervous horses, the general effect. He noted the rider. And that rider was the man of the queer grey eyes—Larry Shanks. On the next corner Chief Loney, and a man he was later to know as Sheriff Bow, stood talking quietly. Their gaze drifted toward Shanks—with interest, Jack thought; but it may only have been interest in the horsemanship of that rider stringing along two restive horses as well as keeping his own quiet. The enlivened beasts, sidling and nostril-dilating, looked as if they had been in the stable some time and feeding on oats. Larry knew his mounts: He turned up Lewis Street with the two horses in tow and Fiske walked on to the Rossland Hotel.

More than ever Jaffrey seemed to be a movie town. It struck him that the stage carpenters could take it all down in half-an-hour and build up, in place of a western mining-boom town, the towers of Constantinople, while the outfit changed from Stetson hats to fezzes. And

there was Ma Donovan looking out of a window. As he entered the hall-way she appeared there and smiled at him.

"Well, Mr. Fiske, struck a job yet?" she asked.

"I have!" he said definitely.

"Now I'm glad," said she. "I am glad. I told Don to see if he couldn't rustle something for you. Now don't you think it's because we want you to get the money so's to pay us money. Plenty hotel proprietors are in the habit of getting in touch with employers of labour and fixing up jobs with them for their boarders. Why, some men are just tied to their hotel. The proprietors and the job-bosses work it between them. A stranger coming into a town where that sort of thing goes don't stand much show of getting a job. No blame to any of them. It's only the result of hard times. But when I saw you I said to Don I hoped you'd get a job soon for your own sake. You see, Jaffery has boomed away beyond its present possibilities, as they say. A year ago it was good. Now it's over-crowded. In another year it will have settled down kind of steady maybe. This here floating population will some of it have got jobs, and the rest will have moved on. Life's all right. But it's a hard proposition sometimes. All the same we

don't want it to make us hard. You see"—she hesitated a moment, then spoke on—"you're just what our boy would have been if—" and then she coughed and rubbed her eyes.

An older man than Fiske would have understood that these were tears in her eyes. He thought that "Ma" had a cold. But Prop Donovan arriving on the scene then realized otherwise, with an anxious look at his wife.

"Ma! You're vexing yourself over something!" he said.

"Oh," said she, producing a little handkerchief from somewhere, as if by a conjuring trick, "I'm only glad to hear Mr. Fiske has got a job."

Donovan clapped her shoulder.

"Now ain't that foolish of her?" he asked, turning to Fiske. "Weeping for pleasure! Weeping for happiness!" and he clapped her again. "So you've got a job?"

"Yes. I'm going out with Dewar and Bradley this afternoon."

"O that's fine!" exclaimed Ma. "Packing up to that government survey outfit with them! Now that's a fine healthy life for a young man. But that's queer. Shows how you can't believe any gossip you hear. I heard that the government survey was finished, and that Mr. Dewar and Bunt Bradley were through with

their job. Somebody said to me the other day they wondered what they kept hanging around town for."

"I guess they're not through yet," said Donovan.

"They can't be, seeing they've hired on Mr. Fiske for an additional packer. There! That's a lesson not to believe the news. Who is this coming in here? Why, it's that guide and packer man himself, Walt Dewar. Guess he's coming in to see you, Mr. Fiske," and Ma retired.

Through the doorway they saw Dewar strolling up to the house along that side side-walk on its trestle over the little gulch. He came directly into the hall-way, and in the formula of such visits said: "Excuse me. Could I speak to you a moment?"

Donovan turned away, as fussily as a man of his size could fuss away, and John said: "Come right in."

Walt the Wolfer walked to a window seat in the big barish room called rotunda and sat down.

"Nice little hotel this," he said. "A home away from home sort of air about it. I tap atmosphere quickly. Makes you think of home and mother. Chequer-board in the corner, but no card-table. Well, when we say we feel

the atmosphere of a place we really don't. It's unconscious observation. Chequer-board in the corner; bit of crochet-work with hook affixed on a window-ledge." He lowered his voice to continue. "Things are happening. They began to happen just after you left us. I hate to put you in an automobile instead of on a horse, but so as to make everything fit rightly in the jig-saw puzzle of our trip I'll have to ask you to go to MacIntyre's Bluff on the stage tomorrow, and meet us there. It will be a better place for us to fit out from."

He paused and rubbed the under side of his chin, looking up at a ceiling corner. Fiske watched him thoughtfully.

"I saw that man who fired at you today," said he suddenly.

"Oh!" said the Wolfer without looking away from the ceiling corner. "Why do you tell me that?"

"I thought it might interest you. I thought perhaps the fact that I saw him riding up Lewis Street with two led horses might come into the jig-saw puzzle."

"Who's been talking to you? Or have you had time already to be talking to somebody?"

"No. I've heard about the Good Enough, as I told you, and about Shanks and you and Bunt."

“Talk. Talk. There’s a lot of talk. I saw Shanks too. That is why I’ve changed my scheme. He’s running a bluff. He’s chary in case the police find out about who fired that shot. That makes him want to hurry matters. But if I’m any judge of a man he’ll only go and take a circumbendibus in the hills and come back again to see if we’ve gone.”

“Does he know where the prospect is?” asked Fiske—a mighty direct question to fire at a man who, even talking of the expedition, had been very reticent regarding detail.

“It’s a certainty if he does that he won’t share the news with anybody,” the Wolfer replied, non-committal.

“You don’t know if he does?” questioned John.

The Wolfer frowned. He had the air of a man trying to be patient.

“If I knew everything I wouldn’t be acting like a kid with a jig-saw puzzle. Anyhow,” his voice though not raised, had a mighty definite ring, almost parade rasp, as if he had commanded men once in his life maybe, “as I’m the brains of the expedition, Bunt the heavy-weight, and you the diplomat, shall we say—as I’m the heap big chief—I’m to give the orders. The planning is up to me, whether I happen to be going right or wrong. I want you to go to

MacIntyre's Bluff on tomorrow's stage."

He put his hand in his pocket and drew forth a wad of bills, and picked off five for ten dollars each.

"That will keep you in funds till we meet there—or till you meet Bunt anyhow. It's half your first month's wages. One of us will wait here till Shanks has finished his little bluff of going out into the hills." He rose abruptly, once more felt his chin, gazing upward, then said: "Well, so long," and was gone next moment out of the door with his slow stride.

Fiske watched him projecting himself (to use the phrase that Donovan had applied to that walk) leisurely to the side-walk, watched him till he was out of sight. The big-four hat, the slightly crooked legs turned a corner. And then he felt that the whole place was the real original of the "Wild West movie town," and that he was one of the actors.

"I can't write home about this," he mused. "This isn't getting a job in the back-east sense, or even the middle-west sense, or the west-coast sense! This could only happen right here among these almighty hills as he called them."

CHAPTER SIX

A HORSEMAN IN AN AUTOMOBILE

WITH that valise which Donovan had said was Jack Fiske's sole tie to Jaffery (whereas he, Donovan, was staked to a hotel), Jack stood in the hall-way of the Rossland House saying "so-long." His bill was paid, thanks to the advance of fifty dollars he had received from the Wolfer, and he was inwardly living up to the full hopefulness of "sufficient to the day . . ."

"You're sure it don't leave you short, paying up all your bill?" asked Ma.

"Quite sure," said Jack. "You see I've had a half month's wages in advance so that I can go out to MacIntyre's Bluff, and I have a few dollars still left."

"It beats me—this going to MacIntyre's Bluff," said Ma. "Maybe Mr. Dewar is going to pack supplies in from there if the government survey party is working further along in the mountains; but he's got all his string of horses here. Why don't you ride? That's what I wonder."

"You leave it to Walt Dewar," said Donovan. "He don't act foolish. He's got some reason for telling Fiske to go to MacIntyre's Bluff by car and meet him there, some reason simple enough if you only knew."

"O sure! Only I'm curious. Well you're going out to a healthy life. I guess it wasn't right about the survey being over. They've worked on further into the mountains. That's all, I guess. That's what it is! I'm glad you've got a good job. A hundred a month and all found. That's good enough."

So it was with the words "good enough" ringing in his ears like a refrain that Jack, with his suit-case, went down the street to board the auto-stage for MacIntyre's Bluff. The car was throbbing before the Tremont Hotel. That was the place to meet friends, to look for bosses in town, to hear the band, to board the stage.

"All aboard for the Bluff, Eagle Bend and the railroad, San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and all other outside burghs!" said the gay driver.

Jack climbed aboard. Men stood on the sidewalk looking at the car and chewing and smoking and meditating. To see the stage off had some attraction for them, the same attraction as that told of in the ballad of "Watching the

Trains go out—watching the Trains come in.” Three passengers made the total, Jack included. Then suddenly down the street came the Wolfer calling out: “Ho! Ho! Hold the stage a moment. Here’s another passenger pulling out of this rocky town for the haunts of the prairie-chickens.”

The men on the side-walk parted as Walt came jogging along carrying a grip. He threw it into the car and clambered to the vacant front seat beside the driver’s seat. The driver slipped in behind his wheel, drew on his gloves; the car bobbed and darted away and whirled round a corner.

They were off. It was high-speed travel from the start. The houses just seemed to dash past on either hand, and then they were on the double-rutted road through the woods, shot past a cleared patch where cows stared and cow-bells clanged, shot past a shack or two, made the chipmunks scurry across the road with an air of trepidation, took a bend, and there, ahead of them, appeared a coyote, sitting scratching itself. At the car’s advance it gave a leap in air as though made of springs, and ran, helter-skelter straight on in the road-way at a swinging nervous lope. The driver accelerated, and swaying and bouncing the car dashed after the coyote.

"Driver!" ejaculated the man beside Jack.
"Are you trying to run over that poor dog?"

"Dog?" enquired the driver in a high voice.
"What dog?"

"In front. Can't you see? Look at the dog."

"I don't see a dog."

"Bless me! Bless me! Look, man. You see the dog?" he enquired of the other passenger.

"No, sir," was the reply. "I see no dog."

"Bless me! Bless me! I must be a sick man."

The Wolfer turned. Over his shoulder he said: "Coyote. Variously called coyoté—coyote—ky-yoot—according to taste irrespective of correctness!"

"Oh! I thought I must be a sick man, seeing things."

The other passenger remained mute, expressionless.

The coyote increased the momentum of his lope, whirled, as with a backbone made of spring, into the scrub of second growth and the car slackened speed slightly. It was as well, as the occupants were bobbing up and down like so many peas in a bladder. The Wolfer made some remark to the driver which he missed.

"How's that?" he shouted.

"There's a tendency to grab leather!" the Wolfer repeated.

"Oh! Guess it goes against the grain of a horseman to do that!"

Still on they rushed and suddenly there appeared three riders headed toward them. The bush was close on either hand. The horses glared and stood up like unicorns. The riders wrestled valiantly with them. But the driver did not slow down. Jack saw Dewar look at him sidewise, frowning. He looked again at the riders. They were managing their horses wonderfully. As an exhibition of horsemanship it was exhilarating; it was a spectacle of horsemanship; but it struck him it was more than exhilarating to the riders. Still the car rushed on. Ahead the horses wheeled, were restrained by their riders, plunged and snorted. One was scared to the point of bolting a few steps but was again checked.

"I guess you'd better slow up," said Walt; but the driver did not slacken.

"This automobile is carrying the mail," he shouted. "It runs on schedule."

"I guess you'd better stop," and Dewar's voice was high and rasping.

"I'm—running—this—car," replied the driver.

At that Dewar leant forward and shut off

the engine. Followed at once the intense quiet of the woods after the racket of the car.

"What the — you mean by that?"

"All right, gentlemen," Dewar shouted to the men ahead. "We'll stop till you get past."

Snorting, rearing, sidling, protesting, the horses drew level and passed. Then the driver alighted to crank the car again, Fiske imagined, but instead of cranking it he stood in the road.

"Come on here," he said grimly to Dewar, "and I'll show you who's running this car."

Dewar slowly stepped out and lounged toward him. Then said he, over his shoulder; "Can any of you gentlemen drive an auto?"

No one answered.

"I got to know before I begin this," he said. "I can't drive a car and I want to get to MacIntyre's Bluff."

"You'll get to MacIntyre's Bluff all right, but so as your mother won't know you," said the driver.

"Can any of you gentlemen drive—"

"I can," said the man on Jack's left.

"That's all right then," said Dewar, but the driver had leapt at him.

Then it was as if, so to speak, a section had been dropped out of the film, for the driver was next definitely to be seen in the midst of a bush

by the road-side. He rose and again rushed on Dewar who stepped aside. That was all the Wolfer seemed to do—step aside; but he must have done more again, for the driver was once more down with a crash, a greater crash than during his first fall, on the road-side scrub. He rose and stood glaring.

“Say, who are you?” he demanded.

“Dewar’s my name—Walt Dewar.”

“Dewar!” said the driver. “Pleased to meet you. You’re Walt the Wolfer. I just wondered suddenly when I thought a second about the spectacles. I’ve heard of you. Why in heck didn’t you present a card before you challenged me?”

Dewar laughed.

“You were the challenger, I think,” said he.

“That’s right. That’s right!” said the driver.

He stepped to the car, cranked it and both climbed in.

“Who did he say he was?” enquired the silent passenger.

Jack shook his head.

“Who? Who?” the rotund one asked.

“Didn’t catch,” replied the silent one.

But again they were rushing and bobbing through the wood with a purring crackle.

And Jack Fiske recalled what a travelled rel-

ative had told him shortly before he left home.

"So you're hitting out for the West, the West before you reach the coast and sophistication again, all that is left of the Wild and Woolly. It's still there, I expect. Mountains and woods and creeks. Some people think nothing happens there but just the trees growing and the mountains soaring. Man! Incident! Things are always happening there."

"He is a mighty alert man, anyhow," said the rotund gentleman as if speaking to himself. "But the spectacles wouldn't have fooled me. No siree! If he was wearing a monocle with a black ribband to it, it wouldn't have fooled me. Why, man, that—fellow—is—tough!" and then he looked a moment as in trepidation lest Dewar had heard.

Dewar's head was raised and slightly backward. His hand went up and he rubbed the under side of his chin gently as though to feel if he required a shave. His gaze was meditative, up in the air, or among the tree-tops that had the appearance of rushing past. Jack, who had seen that gesture once or twice, surmised that the Wolfer had heard the heavy and fussy gentleman's remark and was considering whether or no to make it known that he had heard. Then Dewar relaxed, chin on chest, and tugged down the rim of his big-four hat against the rush of the wind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MACINTYRE'S BLUFF

JAFFERY looked out at the mountains, but MacIntyre's Bluff was in the midst of them. The feeling of being in a dream, or at a play, left Jack Fiske entirely when they alighted there. Here was hard reality. In a clearing were half-a-dozen log-cabins. A creek brawled down out of thick timber above. The clearing still showed the old stumps here and there. Across the creek was a ranch, snake-fenced. High overhead a hawk veered in space. A trail led away into the woods beside the creek with the effect of a low door in a monstrous cathedral of a million columns.

The Wolfer left Jack for a few minutes and disappeared into the rear quarters of the log-hotel. There Jack could hear his voice and a girl replying, and then he re-appeared.

Supper was served to the travellers on a long trestle table in that low log-house, served by a very pretty girl in a dainty shirt-waist, and a skirt nowise lacking in cut and hang. The heels of her little shoes went tip-tapping

to and fro, the chief sound (apart from the unceasing roar of the creek outside) as the travellers ate in a subdued fashion common to diners in such places. There was that queer air of restraint, hush, almost of holding breath, almost of bad little boys who had been told to see if they could be seen but not heard for half-an-hour. "Table conversation" was of the briefest. The driver of the car, who sat down after the others (having to wash more grime from his hands at the basin, outside at the faucet, than the rest), seemed horrified at the loud noise made by his spoon as he circled it round his saucer to secure the last of the juice of apricots that made the final course. He snatched a wooden tooth-pick from a stack of them in a small tumbler on the table's centre, and with a whispered "Pardon me" rose and slunk from the room like a culprit, but once outside he braced up again. The rotund traveller rose.

"Your father well, Miss James?" he asked.

"Yes thank you, Judge," said the girl.

"Judge!" thought Jack. "So he's a judge, this fussy well-shaven elderly gentleman."

"Not around?" enquired the Judge.

"Not just now."

"Remember me to him."

"I will, Judge."

"Yes, yes," he said, fussing. "Yes, yes,"

and clapped his side-pockets, and passed out.

The other traveller, when he was gone, said: "Let me see. I know that gentleman's face. He's Judge—ah—Judge—er—"

"Davenport," said the girl. "Are you through?"

"Yes thank you."

She whisked plates away, and that gentleman selected a tooth-pick, went out as if covertly.

The Wolfer sat back.

"Yes," he said in a quiet voice to Jack, "that is Judge Davenport, all right. And the man who has just gone out is Carl Scott, who runs cars of booze from the Canadian border as far as to California. He wants to keep posted on Judges, Marshals, and Sheriffs. And I am sorry the judge has got a prejudice against me—taking me for a tough without evidence. I was only thinking of the men in the saddle and the horses. Mail-car, indeed! Running to schedule! What's the mail beside horses? And the pretty little thing who attended our wants is the daughter of one of the best men in this section. He used to be over on the plains—Tom James. Yes, the little piece of georgette shirt-waist, wavy hair, and just-so skirt is Nancy. I suppose her sweetheart will call her Nan. I'll introduce you now we're alone and she's not flustered with serving the meals."

She returned at that.

The Wolfer rose to his feet and said: "Nancy—Miss James, allow me to present to you Mr. Fiske."

Jack rose and made his bow.

"Please to meet you!" said Miss James.

"I suppose we can fix up to stop over here tonight, Nancy?" the Wolfer asked.

"Why sure, Mr. Dewar!" she said. "And now you tell me what you're doing here so far from the plains."

"I've been acting as guide, and toting supplies in to a survey party. It was handier to go in from Jaffery latterly than from the other side. They are putting stove-pipes on top of the peaks."

"You're always joshing, Mr. Dewar! Stove-pipes, indeed!"

"I'm not joshing," he declared. "That's right. They put a stove-pipe up on end and fill it solid, and then put a cairn of stones round it. Funny things men do."

"Whatever do they do that for?"

"O, it's a pleasant vacation in the hills. It's got to do with making maps and taking measurements of peaks and distances, and so on—all part of the general fuss. Progress—civilization."

She came close and leant against the table,

hands behind her, very engagingly looking in his eyes.

The chauffeur came to the door.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he asked, "are you going on?"

"No. O, I've to settle with you," said Dewar.

And he and Jack, at the same moment, pulled forth a crumple of bills.

"How much?" asked Jack.

"Five," said the driver.

Jack handed his over—his last five in the world. Now he was broke! The chauffeur took it with a brief word of thanks. To Dewar, as he took his proffered bill, said he: "Well, that's all, Mr.—er—Dewar."

"O call me Walt!" said Dewar. "Sorry about that little disagreement."

"Why man, that's nothing! You were quite right." He thrust the money in his pocket. "And pleased to meet you. I guess we gasoline people do sometimes look as if the road was ours. I'm supposed to keep to schedule, too—carrying the mails. But that's all right. Shake?"

"Sure, sure," said Walt, extending a hand.

The two shook warmly.

"Good-luck," said the driver, and with a nod was gone.

The car crackled outside. The crackle whirled away. And then, to Jack's astonishment, a telephone bell (or so it seemed) rang. Yes, it was indeed a telephone bell with two peremptory rings. The wire dropped into MacIntyre's Bluff as into many a place as small among the mountains. Nancy enquired: "Now that ring! Was that once twice, in a hurry or twice once? It's a party-line¹ of course and the rings puzzle me sometimes.

Walt laughed and ejaculated: "Once twice or twice once! Better take off the receiver and find out if it's for you."

"I hate to listen-in if it's not for us," she said.

Nancy whirled on a heel, however, and drawing a curtain, disappeared to do as Walt suggested.

"Hullo! Yes! Yes! Right here. Hold the line, please. Mr. Dewar!"

The Wolfer walked slowly across the room, slipped from sight. Then came his voice:

¹ *Party line*: A single telephone line serving various houses. Each is called by a different number, or arrangement of rings, long and short, from "Central"—that is "Exchange." One long ring on the part of a subscriber is to attract Central's attention to obtain a connection, and subscribers mark a connection finished by one sharp ring. Should anyone upon a party-line remove the receiver to listen when a ring is given to or by another subscriber, such an act is called "listening in."

“Hullo. Yes. Speaking. Yes, we’re here. He hasn’t. Well you wait a day or two and see if he does and then you know what news to circulate. So-long.”

Fiske, waiting, wondering what the call portended, had his mind deflected from that thought by the picture made by the Wolfer and Miss James as they came back to the room. Indefinable! Indefinable! Here was a something as they say; he couldn’t tell what it was. Something in the way she stepped into the dining-room as Walt held the curtain aside seemed to announce elation. She was very bright. She seemed lit up within. “They’re lovers!” thought Jack. He looked at Dewar; but Dewar’s expression was as usual, almost sad. In fact it might almost be said he had no expression. The picture somehow stuck in Jack’s mind. Slowly Walt strolled on and out of doors, drawing from his hip-pocket a tobacco pouch and a pipe. On a log before the door he sat down, and slowly filled his pipe.

“Well, that’s good enough,” said the Wolfer. “All goes well.”

“It does?” said Jack, hoping for information regarding the telephone call and how all went well.

“Yep!” said Dewar, and striking a match on his leg held it till the sulphur burned, then

drew and blew a cloud of smoke. "That was a ring from Bunt just to say that Larry Shanks hasn't come back to Jaffery. I'm willing to bet he will, that he's only gone out to give us a chance to act. He'll only go up the Seven-Up road a little bit and camp there, I bet, and come in again. But if he doesn't show up in a day or two Bunt will set out to meet us."

And within, Nancy's heels, as she came and went, clearing up the table, tip-tapped, and she sang as she walked to and fro.

Up from the meadow by the creek a dog came to examine the newcomers, a dog that walked slowly, with a left-right, left-right oscillation of his tail that increased as he came nearer and turned into a leisurely wag. He walked straight on to the two men sitting on the log, then bobbed up, putting a paw on either of Dewar's knees. From the door Nancy's voice came.

"They all take to you, Mr. Dewar," she said.

Dewar put a hand on the dog's head and glanced around at her.

"It shows a poor taste," he said.

"Do you remember that sorrel you broke for Dad at Big Prairie?"

"Yes. Still got him?"

"Yes. Father brought him along when he came into the mountains. I was just remem-

bering how you broke him by getting the rope round his neck and then letting him smell your breath, and how I made sure he'd bite you, and how he just quieted down. You told me you learnt that stunt from a Cheyenne horse-breaker."

"Fancy you remembering that! Yes, he was a good beast. How's he turned out?"

"Fine. Want to see him?"

"He ain't on the range, then?"

"No, he's among the bunch Dad keeps for hiring to prospectors, and folks generally, going up into the mountains. He's over in the stables. If you want to see him you'd better come over before it's too dark; we'd need a lantern soon."

Walter rose and turning to Jack said: "Come along!" The girl's manner, if not Dewar's, thought John, suggested that he might make a poor three-some out of a good two-some.

"O I can see him any time," said Jack.

Nancy swung on gaily.

"Come on—come on, and look at the horses," said Dewar.

The stable was a big building. At the opening of the door a row of horses fronting a long hay-rack all turned their heads and googled their eyes in the curious way of their

kind. Nancy walked down the row. The Wolfer strolled after her. Fiske dallied just inside. Suddenly a beautiful sorrel with broad fore-head and irregular white-splashed Roman nose grew restive, sidled this way and that, craned his neck round and whinnied.

"He remembers you," said Nancy.

The Wolfer walked closer and addressed him.

"Well, Prester," he said.

"And you remember the name I gave him?" said Nancy. She turned to Jack, the first indication that she did not too greatly resent his presence. "I was reading a book about Prester John when we got that sorrel, and Mr. Dewar was breaking him. Dad asked me to name him—so I said 'Prester.' "

"I was always interested in Prester John," said the Wolfer. "Prester John and Marco Polo I never could forget, or Kaid Macdonald. There is something about these men who get out of the rut and go and see things—something about them that I like. None of your darn settlers about them."

She looked a moment at him with lowered eyes. And as they stood there, Walter clapping Prester John's neck, there came loping into the stable one pack-horse after another.

"Hul-lo!" exclaimed Dewar. "What's this? Seem to think there's a party here.

Hullo, folks!" This last was to the horses.

"Dad's coming back evidently," said Nancy. "He's been down to the railroad for some supplies. He did not know whether he'd be in tonight or tomorrow."

"May as well get off these loads and pack-saddles for him," said Dewar, and set to work immediately.

As the last saddle was hung up there came the flip of a horse-hoof outside, click of hoof on a stone, sound of some one dismounting with a creak of saddle. Then, lines in hand, a man entered the big, high-roofed, barn of a building. In appearance he reminded John of Whitman. He had a big, soft slouch-hat on his head, troubled eyes, and a great beard sweeping over his broad chest.

"Hello, Dad," said Nancy.

"Hello, Nancy!" said the big bearded man, and brushed a kiss on her forehead as she stood lithe to meet him after three skips in his direction. He glanced at John, then saw the Wolfer but the latter was in the blue shadow of the interior of the barn.

"How do, Tom?" said Dewar, coming forward.

"O it's you, Walt! Well, well!" and Tom James extended a hand. To Fiske's mind there were both pleasure and doubt in his manner.

The inference of it was that his liking for Walt (liking was evident) was of the kind called sneaking—a “sneaking regard,” a liking against himself. Jack had the impression then that this Dewar, this Walt the Wolfer, was a man with a reputation, of sorts.

“I’ve just been renewing acquaintance with Prester John,” said Dewar.

“Uh-hu! A good horse,” said James, unsaddling the horse on which he had ridden in. “A good horse. I couldn’t part with him when we came in here from the plains.”

“What did you leave Big Prairie for?”

“Not big enough. Getting too crowded. Well, they’ll learn their lesson. None of the old leases are being renewed to stockmen. Cutting it all up and selling to irrigated grangers.”

“It sounds like a swear!” said Nancy.

“It feels like it,” said her father. “Now we do half our ranching here at an angle of fifty degrees. Round-up in draws and through cotton-wood dingles.”

“I’ll go rustle some supper for you, Dad,” said Nancy, and went dancing away.

Her father glanced after her, then hanging up his saddle lifted down a sack of oats and poured on the ground about a hatful on four different parts of the floor. The three pack-

horses, and his saddle-horse immediately began to munch.

"Guess that's all," he said, flicking his hands together. "They drank at the creek, I guess—the pack-horses. They jig-a-jogged ahead sprintingly the last mile. You drank anyhow," to his saddle-horse. "There! That's all right. Thanks to somebody—you I guess, Walt—for unloading. That stuff will be all right there. Nothing they can nose about. They know their places before the rack for the night. We'll go over. And how goes all with you, Walt?"

"O pretty good," said the Wolfer as they clustered outside while James affixed the door bar. "I've been packing for a bunch of government cartographers. They started up from the Big Prairie side, but latterly it was a better proposition to pack from Jaffery. Finished that job just three weeks ago."

"And you kept hanging around a darned mining centre like Jaffery for three weeks!" ejaculated James. "Why man, it's hard to get a horse there now. In the old days they had horses at the stables for folks going into the hills. Now if you're going into the mountains for any reason they give you a rush in an automobile, as far as it can go, and then you've to get out and walk. Three weeks in a mining town? What possessed you?"

"An interest I have in a mining claim."

"A what?"

"O it ain't mine yet. It's a dead man's."

James shot him a look somewhat worried, doubtful.

"Yep. He was found in the hills by a man in what the doctor once called a moribund state and the coroner used it hard—seemed to like the word, used it a lot. He had struck a particularly rich vein. He had specimens in his pockets. They assayed beyond anything Jaffery has known, and Jaffery has had some good assays they tell me. I met the man that picked him up—and that maybe knocked him down for all I know—and he told us all where his prospect is."

"He did! Any dependants?"

"No. Nobody at all."

"It's practically yours, then?"

"Yes," slowly. "It's Bunt's and mine."

"Bunt? Bunt Bradley?"

Dewar nodded.

"You're still around with him, then?"

"I am, and object to him as much as you do; but he has some good streaks. He's all right helping with the packing work."

"O yes. Who was the other man?"

"That's the trouble. The other man was Larry Shanks."

“That—” James said no more.

“As you say. That—! I said to him.” (Walt seemed to forget John’s presence. He halted on the path, crossing to the log-hotel) “I said to him: ‘Shanks,’ I said, you went back on me over the Duck Creek hold-up. You got Bunt and me three years for it, and you got clear’ ” (John started, astounded at this news) “ ‘and you ain’t going to get any of this prospect. That’s how we get back on you!’ ”

So there John had the whole truth suddenly regarding the position between Walt and Bunt and Shanks—which Prop Donovan did not know.

“And what did he say?”

“He told me a bygone was a bygone. And I told him he might count himself lucky if I didn’t shoot him up for what he’d done and run the chance of stretching hemp, or sitting in the permanent crimp chair. He had the gall to say we could go shares. He’d picked the fellow up first, he said. I told him there was no shares in it, and that it was mine—and Bunt’s. Since then he’s just been keeping tabs on us, and we’ve been watching him.”

“He’s scared to go out alone?”

“Yep, and he hates to take any one else into his secret.”

"Well, you ain't scared of him even in the hills."

"No, but if he sees he can't own it alone he'll take counsel with others of his own kind and they'll try to keep us from getting it."

"Yes. That's Larry Shanks all right. What are you here for?"

"To go up to the headwaters of MacIntyre Creek and meet Bunt there. If we'd started right out from Jaffery Larry would have known. Bunt is to give out that I'm sick of the hills and have gone back to the plains, and that he's to go over the mountains with the pack-string we've been using at our work there feeding these survey men. Our idea is that Larry will believe that. Or he'll not disbelieve it strongly enough to gather together any of his gun-men friends to go with him to the prospect. He'll think we've given up the idea of going to see about it and he'll go alone. We'll be there!"

"You'd shoot him up there?" enquired James, watching the fierce expression on the Wolfer's face.

"O he'll have every chance to shoot first."

"Well, well," said James frowning. "I can't very well deliver you a lecture on being good to Larry Shanks. He's a bad actor. Anything that's coming to him can't be too

bad. I was right sorry you went and got mixed up in that hold-up. By the way, this gentleman your friend?"

"He's all right. Meet Mr. James, Mr. Fiske. Pardon me for forgetting."

They shook hands, James peering in Jack's eyes in a manner part benign, part troubled.

"Well, Walt, it seems to me that Larry Shanks will wonder at your pulling out of Jaffery for the rail-road instead of going after your prospect."

"O I've got a name for doing crazy things—letting sure-thing propositions go, and going a-fishing for the day, so to speak."

James gave a dry laugh.

"That's true too," he said. "Anyhow it will keep him guessing long enough for you to get a move on. Bunt's to go out from Jaffery then as if for the trail over the divide to the plains?"

"Yep. That's it."

"Won't Shanks want to make sure that Bunt is not going to the prospect, even if you are not?"

"He might. But our splitting up is going to keep him guessing. And if we get that claim re-staked and registered—"

"O then you're all right. I don't see Shanks taking it all dead easy, though."

"You forget two things: that Shanks is scared stiff because he knows I have a possible one coming to him. And the other is that what he thinks there's a chance of getting all for himself on his lonesome he'll never share."

"That's what too!" James murmured, stroking his beard, and then said he: "But he's got a lot of crooked friends around. That's why we all at Big Prairie took that hold-up affair badly. You had side-slipped, so to speak—you and Bunt—though I believe Bunt had done the like before. But we all knew Larry Shanks was fit for such games all the time and him to blab on you made all us upright fellows feel sorry for you!" and James laughed.

"What—are—you—folks—standing there talking for? Hard at it as a sewing circle!" Thus Nancy hailed them.

Laughing, the three men moved on through the last of the sunset glow to Tom James's way-house, the log-hotel of MacIntyre's Bluff.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“GOT ANY SIX-GUNS?”

“WE need not come in to watch you eating your supper,” said Walt. “That log shack over there—is it a store?”

“Sure. That’s the old original MacIntyre’s—added to during half-a-century till you see it as it is. And old MacIntyre’s still on deck.”

A sense of the newness of the West struck Fiske. Back East the men after whom the places were named are dust and a faint legend, or oblivion. The MacIntyre of MacIntyre’s Bluff and MacIntyre Creek was still alive!

“Still alive! Listening to his own creek!” he broke out, and James looked at him with a brightness, and interest. Till then Walter and Mr. James had been talking. John had only drifted along behind them till introduced and then lapsed into silence again.

“That’s what,” said James, “a famous man in his time, among Westerners. We used to hear of him sometimes at Big Prairie. He went through in a prairie-schooner with his wife. Used to trap in here in the old days.

He's always around, sometimes in the store-end, sometimes in the house-end. There's a light just lit right now at the store-end. You can trade all right. See you anon, then.”

Walt and John crossed the creek by the bridge where the auto-stage had rushed on to Eagle Bend, walked up to the long log-cabin and entered, stooping at the low door. Under the vista of rafters were two stable-lanterns hanging, making gleams of light on the regiments of tinned goods, glints of radiance on bottles along the shelves. On the counter was a tower of hats reaching the roof, one set in another, and along the counter a row of barrels which, as they advanced, they saw to contain inch nails, two-inch nails, spikes, horse-shoes. A row of saddles hung from a beam, high-saddles, pack-saddles, stock-saddles. Coils of rope lay on the floor along one wall as on a ship's deck; and behind the counter, from between a mound of flour sacks an old man (the celebrated MacIntyre) with hair as white as fleece, and dark eyes that looked as if there were little flames in them, glanced up from a file of accounts or receipts he was conning. Thrusting the spectacles he wore upward on to his forehead he nodded.

“Good-evening, sir,” said the Wolfer.

“Good-evening, sir,” said MacIntyre.

Then Dewar stood and rubbed the under side of his chin and gazed up at one of the stable-lanterns round which a moth whirled so quickly as to seem like a revolving silver-grey halo.

"I want a few things," the Wolfer brought out.

"Yep," said MacIntyre.

"Two sacks of flour," said Walt.

The old man lifted two sacks from the heap and laid them before him.

"One sack rice."

From the other side MacIntyre pushed a sack of rice in place.

"A whack of bacon."

The old man turned to where the "whacks" of bacon hung. Over his shoulder he enquired: "Trail?"

"Sure."

MacIntyre selected one with a superfluity of frying fat and laid it on the counter.

"Sack of beans."

"Sack of beans."

"Tea—four pounds; coffee, two pounds."

"Tea—coffee."

So they went on till, the provisioning over, the Wolfer stood feeling his chin's under side and gazing with a pensive expression at the still revolving halo near the lamp that was of a circling moth.

"Want a rifle," he said.

"Got a permit?" enquired MacIntyre.

"Yep," and Dewar took a pocket-book from his inner pocket and extracted a slip of stiff paper. MacIntyre drew his glasses down from forehead to eyes, glanced at it, and then opened a drawer and drew forth some printed forms, one of which he thrust to Dewar, and turning he took a leaden inkpot from a shelf, examined the pen thrust in it, and handed it over.

"Just sign that, Mr. Dewar, please, for my file," he said. He had of course read the name of his customer on the permit.

Dewar dipped the pen and signed.

"What kind of a shooting-iron do you want, then, Mr. Dewar?"

"Oh!" The Wolfer rubbed his chin. "Got a .303?"

"Yes. U. S., British, or Savage," and he walked from sight behind the stack of flour sacks, returning with a rifle which he laid on the counter, departed and brought back two others. He was certainly methodical.

"I'll have this one," said Walt. "Dandy peep-sight."

"All right," said MacIntyre. "Yep. There comes a time of life to every man when he requires a peep-sight on his shooting-iron."

"Got any six-guns?"

MacIntyre looked sharply at him.

"Have you a short-arm house-protection license?" he asked.

"Nope."

MacIntyre took off his spectacles and put them on the shelf behind him. Then he turned back.

"What was that you said? What was that? Let me see. The print on these licenses is too small for me if I don't have my glasses. Show me your license. Guess these stringent laws about short-arm guns are designed chiefly for Bolsheviki and Bohunks, and not for a man like you, Mr. Dewar. But I got to see some kind of a license. Show me your short-arm license. I lost track of my spectacles."

John was on the point of telling the old man, taking him for absent-minded, that he had put them behind him, but promptly, with a faint twinkle through the gravity of his own spectacles, Walt again produced his pocket-book and again showed his license—the ordinary license for carrying a gun, in the ordinary sense of the word.

"That your license for a six-gun?" asked MacIntyre. "All right. I can't see good without my glasses. Take your word for it."

MacIntyre set on the counter a revolver in a shiny yellow holster. Walt extracted it,

cocked it, whirled the chamber, “broke” it and then with a fling of his hand, holding the “gun” out, snapped it shut. The next item was cartridges, and then came the addition of the bill.

“And where will you have them sent?” asked MacIntyre in the best manner of the departmental store.

Again a passing twinkle was in the Wolfer’s spectacles.

“I’ll come right here for the whole jag in the morning with the pack-horses.”

“All right, Mr. Dewar.”

“All right, Mr. MacIntyre.”

“Good-night, sir.”

“Good-night, sir.”

By the time they passed out the night had wholly fallen. It was a great cool darkness, with the brawl of the creek loud in the quiet. At first their eyes, new from the light, were aware only of utter dark. Then they saw the sheer black silhouette of hills, and a tree-edge against a dark blue, and the stars sprung out as if suddenly thrown over the sky. Shuffling their feet before them they felt at first for the path; then it showed itself. They came back to the bridge, and crossed to the hotel or way-house. The light from its windows made two clear-cut splashes of gold on the earth

before it. A yellow spot of light rose and fell. The odour of tobacco came to them.

James, sitting smoking a cigar before the door, was ready for an evening talk on the old days before turning in. They talked of Big Prairie chiefly, and named names unknown to Jack. He felt the vast peace and quiet of the night. The smell of the woods, the big timber, was rich, elating—also it seemed soporific. His eyes grew heavy with sleep, but the snap of mountain chill combatted with sleep for half-an-hour. The cigar butt was crushed under heel, the pipes knocked out, and they went indoors—where Nancy was not visible.

Somehow or other Jack jumped to the conclusion that she was “peevied” at Dewar for sitting outside talking to her father so long instead of suggesting an entry.

“How’s the time? Time to turn in?” asked Dewar.

“I don’t know.” James glanced at his watch. “Huh! Nine o’clock.”

Then Nancy came in. Perhaps she had been “peevied”—at the long talk of the men after she left to “rustle” her father’s supper, at Dewar going over to MacIntyre’s then, at his being so leisurely in his shopping instead of coming back to talk to old friends of Big Prairie.

“Hullo, Nancy. Been out?” said Walt.

"Just been over to chat with Mrs. Mac-Intyre."

"Why, Nancy, you go over most every night. Might have stayed to chat with Mr. Dewar," said her father.

"Pshaw, he don't want to chat with me!" she said and spun on her heel.

A very pretty little thing, thought Jack, a pretty little engaging creature, graceful as a doe, very charming pirouetting so, with the lamp-light a mesh in her hair and her eyes and cheeks bright from the open air.

"Well I guess we'll turn in," said Walt. "We've an early start."

"We mostly do turn in early here," said James. "Early in and early up."

"That's the life!" said Walt. "What's the way then?"

"I'll show you," said James, and led the way upstairs.

"Good-night Nancy!" the Wolfer called.

"O! Are you turning in?" came her voice.

"Yep! Good-night!"

"Good-night."

"Good-night, Miss James," called Jack.

"Good-night, Mr.—er—!" came Nancy's voice.

CHAPTER NINE

THE WOLFER "LISTENS IN"

THE ringing of a telephone bell woke Jack in the morning on the small military cot, and it seemed to him again, as on the previous day, a romantic sound among such wild surroundings. Walt was gone from the other cot in the room. He listened, but no one answered the call; so hastily he rose and hurried into his clothes, thinking that no one could have heard, some asleep, others out maybe. When he came downstairs, however, there was Nancy fussing back and forth in the dining-room.

"Good-morning Miss James," said he.

"Good-morning Mr. Fiske," said she. Evidently either she had remembered his name or learnt it again from the early Walt.

"That was an early telephone call," said Jack, just for something to say.

"Yes. It's a bit of a nuisance, that telephone. These party lines keep ringing. MacIntyre's is one long ring and a short one, ours is two short."

At that he suddenly realized the significance

of her remark the day before when she asked if it had rung once twice, or twice once in a hurry.

"Gallaher's ranch," she went on, "is three. There's a long and two short. I don't know who that's for." (Evidently she had not been curious enough to eavesdrop on the wire, to "listen in.") "And there's —oh, one or two others."

Away she went to the kitchen again, and Jack returned upstairs to shave, as he had hastened down simply to be ready to answer the 'phone lest it rang again and there was some message for Dewar. As he was shaving by the window he saw, over the top of the little mirror, Nancy going out to a hen-house; and the next moment came a ringing on the telephone—a long and a short it seemed to his ears.

"That's for MacIntyre's," he considered; and then he heard Dewar's voice saying: "Hullo!"

It amused Jack to think that Dewar had fallen into the same error as he and was answering the 'phone on behalf of the house. In the ensuing pause he surmised that Walter had discovered the mistake, and then to his astonishment he heard:

"No, sheriff. He only stopped off here for

supper. A man wearing spectacles? Yes, that's right. He went out to the railroad. All right, sheriff. Not at all."

Jack sponged his face very thoughtfully and went downstairs, and found Dewar in the doorway of the hotel, head up, feeling his chin as though satisfied with his shave of the morning.

"Hullo," said the Wolfer, turning.

"Hullo," said Fiske; and then: "One long ring and a short one is for MacIntyre, two rings for this house."

"Yes, I've discovered that. Good thing I didn't know before," said Walt. "Good thing that I didn't give the formal reply of 'The James House' when I took off the receiver but only a 'hullo'; lucky that Mrs. MacIntyre is feeding her hens, and Mac is down at the creek-side fishing for breakfast. It was Larry Shanks ringing him up."

"Shanks!"

"Yep. He's come back to Jaffery. Knew he would! He pretended to be the Sheriff of Jaffery, but I recognized his voice. He wanted to know if I was on yesterday's stage, and if I had stopped off here. I set his mind at rest. I told him I had gone right on!"

"Suppose he knew your voice!"

"Have to chance that."

"Why didn't he ring up here?"

"Guess he knows that James is an old Big Prairie man and old friend of mine, and that I would have been put wise that somebody was after me—the sheriff!" he laughed.

Then there were two clear tinkles on the bell and, as Nancy had not returned yet, Walt drew the curtain and went into the rear parlour to reply.

"Hullo. Yes, speaking . . . yes, I know he's come back . . . never mind how, I know . . . now don't forget. I've gone clear out to Eagle Bend to take the train home and you're going over the divide with the horses, and to pack up some things left at the last survey camp on the way. You guess mining-towns don't allure me. Stop there. Add no frills, in case you make it too frilly. Get that? And say, you're drunk! . . . No, I can't smell on a wire, but I know by your voice. . . . How did you get it? I guess Carl Scott ran a consignment. . . . Yes, I know a lot. Cut it out. And look here, Bunt, don't fetch a bottle out on the trail with you! . . . Yes, that's an order. It's for your own good. . . . For your own good, I said."

He stood a space with the receiver at his ear, then hung it up, came back into the dining-room slowly and emitted a "Sshh!" between his teeth as of one disgusted. He was so

gloomy that John Fiske asked no information at the moment regarding details of that conversation. But he gathered from that talk and the preceding one that Larry Shanks had returned from his little pretence of a trip in the mountains, a little make-believe trip that was only undertaken to see what Walt and Bunt would do—and that Bunt must be pretty drunk to sound drunk on a telephone wire.

Then they heard James's voice to rear of the house and Nancy replying, and both entered the room, James carrying a dish of sputtering ham and eggs, Nancy with a big tray and tea-cups. Morning salutations passed between them, and they all sat down to eat without any reference to telephone bells. Breakfast over Walt rose and stretched.

"Well, I suppose we've to be packing. How about horses, Tom?"

"How many you want?"

"Two saddle and two pack, I guess, if we can have them."

"Sure."

"How far do they know their way home?"

"The two pack-horses know their way clean from the head-waters of MacIntyre Creek from two or three trips they've had with prospectors. Guess they'd all come back that length anyhow. But the packs, as I say, have done it already.

I can give you a saddle-horse that's done it too."

"Who? Prester?"

"No, he hasn't done it. Guess he could, all alone, first pop. But if you let them all go together they'll come back together. You'd like to ride Prester, John?"

"On second thoughts, perhaps better not. Better give me something you don't value too highly."

James laughed, knowing the Wolfer's care of horses.

"No, no, I'm serious," said Dewar.

James gazed at him seriously.

"Well, well," he said. "Come and look at them anyhow," and the three men walked over to the stable.

Most of the horses were by then in a big corral at its gable-end, in the open air. Two saddle, and two pack-horses having been selected the pack-saddles were put on and these horses led over to MacIntyre's. There Jack watched the art of throwing the diamond hitch, keenly noting the process, realizing he would have to help at the work. The horses, thus laden, were left tethered to bushes near MacIntyre's store, for the trail they had to travel led up into the woods on that side of the creek. Then they returned for the saddle-horses.

Every action of Dewar's told of the man accustomed to horses: the way his hand smoothed the creases out of the blanket, folded it at the withers, threw the saddle as it were at the horse, and yet brought it down easily in place. The lines were left trailing, and they walked over to say adieu to Nancy, who stood in the doorway of the rest-house.

"Good-luck, whatever you're after," she said to Dewar as he stood, hat in left hand, right extended in farewell. For a brief moment there showed in her eyes as it were a shadow, something in the nature of that troubled look that was in her father's. Jack saw the family likeness at that moment, very markedly.

"Good-bye, Mr. Fiske," she said turning to him.

"Good-bye, Miss James."

"Just before we go," said Dewar to James and walked indoors, the older man following. Then, from inside, came James's voice: "O that's all right!" and Walter's: "Nonsense, man, nonsense."

"No, no—not with you."

"You run a hotel."

"All right. For the meals, then. Not the horses."

"But the horses cost more to hire."

"Yes, that's the idea," and James laughed. "That's why I suggest if you must pay for something, you pay for the meals."

"No, no," said Walter. "You can be hospitable if you like, and treat James's Way-House as a ranch where you feed a friend—and his friend—in passing, if you must. But I pay for the hire of horses."

"When you come back, then! When you come back! I'll see what day the pack-horses return if you send them back ahead of you and charge you for the days like a livery stable man instead of like an old friend. That's settled, so you needn't pay for anything just now." They heard James laugh and a thumping sound as the flat of a hand slapped on a back. Then he came out, thrusting Dewar before him, a hand on his shoulder.

All together they moved to where the saddle-horses, lines trailing, tore grass. The two travellers swung to the saddle. They crossed the bridge, and at MacIntyre's Dewar loosened the tether-ropes of the pack-horses and coiled them, then flipped the beasts on the haunches, sidled them on to the trail. Just at the entering into the timber they looked round—and there was Nancy, standing on a stump, like a figure on a plinth, arm up, hand ready to wave. James, under his big slouch hat, hands on hips stood

near her. She waved. They took off their hats.

James's hand went up and out towards them, palm open: and then they rode on into the Big Timber.

CHAPTER TEN

WHAT HAPPENED AT PLACER FLATS

THE pack-horses went first, jog-jogging along on the winding strip of tamarack needles that was the trail. Dewar followed, hand on cantle, half-turned in his saddle, talking. He began in a trifling way and led to more serious matters.

“Fine man, Tom!” he said. “He didn’t turn me down because I was mixed up in a hold-up over at Big Prairie. It was a bogus company, anyhow, that we held up. We got the wages wagon. They had to shell out the wages again. I don’t know just what we did it for. A bit of devilment chiefly, I think. Bunt and I fell a-talking about how it could be done and then we looked at each other and said: ‘What’s the matter with doing it?’ And then we went and did it! We got away all right and cached the dough; but Larry Shanks saw us and when a reward was offered for the capture of the hold-up men he went and got the reward. And the dough was intact in the cache. We hadn’t divided it. We were waiting for the excitement to pass.

O well, I suppose a lot of hold-up men, from Robin Hood to Deadwood Dick have boasted that they only robbed the rich and the rogues. Deadwood Dick; Richard Bullock, to give him his name; I see he died the other day in a California sanitarium! Imagine it! I guess we were wrong; but Larry Shanks to give us away! That's what got my goat!"

He rode again looking forward and up at the trees. Then again he put hand on cantle and sat talking half-turned, jogging slowly along.

"Mighty clever of Shanks, when he came back to Jaffery and heard I'd gone out on the auto-stage, to ring up MacIntyre instead of the hotel. I wonder what Mac would have said if he had heard the bell and answered instead of me intercepting. I believe he would have said: 'No savvey. Ask at hotel. They know who goes through. I don't rubberneck at travelers!' Something like that he'd have said very likely. He belongs to the old school. But anyhow, Larry is fooled. He thinks I'm off out of the mountains, not going to interest myself with the lost Good-Enough prospect."

He looked ahead again and the horses plodded steadily, on and up, twining on and up through the woods. Ever and again the scent of balsam and tamarack was almost obscured by another scent like honeysuckle.

"Where's the honeysuckle?" enquired Jack.

"That's not true honeysuckle you smell. It's a wee wee flower growing in the woods. It takes a whole patch of them to make that scent. If you pick one or I should say two, for they grow on one little stalk, two by two, close together, you'd hardly smell anything. There they are, in the grass there by the trail-side where the sun gets them. American twin-flower is the common name. And if it interests you to know it Linnæus the famous botanist thought such a heap of it when he saw it that he used it for a kind of crest, his family emblem. The gorse of Old England and the American twin-flower were two flowers he went batty over." Then abruptly he changed the theme, enquiring:

"Say, can you shoot?"

"A little bit with a rifle. With a six-gun I can't get on to this business of coming down and firing all in one motion."

"Takes a bit of practice," said Dewar. "You'll find lots of people who can't do it tell you how to do it, and go through all the gestures of it with their hand—sitting in hotels talking. Huh! Talking! O it's a good way all right, but you spend a pocketful of shells in learning it. Now the way these fellows deride is a good way too. Crook your left arm

like this, and rest your right-hand knuckles, holding the six-gun, in the crook of your left arm. Don't lay the barrel on the left arm. No use scorching a sleeve. Just rest your right hand that way on the left arm, and then sight. Yes—sight! These fellows who sit and talk about six-guns say: 'Don't sight. Don't aim. Point!' Pshaw! That can be done too. But even a darn good six-gun man, if he met a grizzly in a nasty mood, and had only a six-gun, would crook his left arm and aim. As for what they call slamming down a gun, there's plenty of people will tell you that's wrong and that it ought to be brought up and fired instead. I tell you what; it's like Kipling's 'There are nine and ninety ways of constructing tribal lays, and every single one of them is right!' I've known some wonderful shots slam a gun up instead of slamming it down.

He swung from the saddle and picking up a small stone threw it lightly at the haunch of the pack-horse ahead which had stopped to graze instead of just snatching grass as it walked. It threw up its head and loped a few steps, started the leader loping, and then they settled down to the earlier plod again, just snatching mouthfuls of grass or leaf that took their fancy by the way. Because of the tamarack needles on the trail the cavalcade made hardly a sound, the hoofs fell

almost silent. Below, to left, was the creek, hardly visible then except in occasional glimpses between the holes of the firs and cedars. But about noon the trail and the creek met again. They rode out to a wedge of grass beside a bend where the water ran in a long rushing grade. There they dismounted. Then a fire was lit to prepare a meal and in that air John was ready for it. "We may as well take the packs off the horses," said Dewar. "Give 'em an hour's rest. I want to see you do a bit of shooting anyhow, and they might get jumpy with the shooting and go scallyhooting around bumping the packs off under the low branches."

So the saddles, riding and pack alike, were taken off and the horses driven on to that wedge of meadow, Jack and Dewar remaining on the side nearer to MacIntyre's Bluff so that, if the horses strayed, they would not stray back, but on, or if a shot stampeded them it would not be in a stampede on the trail all the way back to the stables, but just ahead a little way. All round the second growth was so thick that for the horses to bolt into the timber was practically impossible.

Dewar strolled along the sweep of meadow, driving the horses easily ahead of him, putting in a quick step where the trail led on as one

of the pack-horses seemed to think he wanted to continue on there. He drove them to the extreme end where a very raft of deadfall made an end of the grass and then, coming back, took a piece of white wood and set it atop a bush near the edge of the timber.

"That's about fifty yards," said he. "It's as long range as the space will allow here. Try the .303 first."

John aimed and fired, and there still was the piece of white wood. He frowned and ejecting the shell raised the rifle again. He tucked it well into his shoulder and through the peep-sight aimed keenly, fired. There was the glimmer of white still atop the bush.

"Fifty yards, and missed that!" he exclaimed.

He ejected the second shell and fired again. Nothing! He looked at Dewar with the face of one who would say: "Well, what do you know about that?"

"Half a minute," said Dewar, and walked slowly to the chip of wood, took it off the bush top and looked at it, brought it back and held it out to John.

"Look!" he said.

John looked and saw on one side three holes and on the other side three long splintered fissures as well.

“Well, how on earth did the bullets not send it flying?”

“Because they do it so neatly. If you’d been shooting with a little .22 the splinter would have jumped in the air. The velocity of these .303 cartridges just makes a flick of a job of it. You can shoot all right. It’s the weight of the target that matters, the resistance. It’s like jiu-jitsu. The more your resistance the worse your fall. If that had been a man there instead of a little feather-weight splinter he’d have been dead all right. If it had been a grizzly bear, considering you can hit a target the size of your palm at that distance, you’d have got his head.

“And he’d have kept on coming?” enquired Jack. “They tell me they have awful vitality.”

“They tell you all kinds of things sitting around in hotels!” scoffed the Wolfer. “If a soft bullet hits a bone it’s going to mushroom ain’t it? And think of the concussion of a shot like that. Try the six-gun.”

He walked away about fifty feet instead of yards and put up another piece of white wood.

John brought the six-gun down and felt it tremble in his grasp. He could not hold it rigid, realized that there was deep reason for the plan of not sighting a six-gun but bringing

it down and firing at end of the descent of the arm. No, he could not hold it sighted on the splinter of wood. He ran his hand forward, looking along the sights, and by doing so combated the tendency to a trembling of the hand. As he ran his hand out so he pressed the trigger. Bang! The chip flew in air.

"All right," said Dewar, "You've done it your own way. It's not the rules that matter. It's the spirit of the rules that matters. That's another way to keep the hand steady on the object long enough to fire, and that's the whole object of all the rules." The Wolfer walked forward and set up the target again.

That time Jack brought the gun down and let fly. Nothing happened. The six shells were spent, at the finish, with only one hit.

"Well, you'll get on to it," said Dewar. "If we meet any kind of trouble you take the .303. That's all I wanted to know."

"We better push on," said Walt. "This is surely like me—chancing it—wasting time! We have to make a ford and if we come to it too late in the day it will be too deep."

"Oh!" said John, for a moment, unaccustomed to the wilderness, astonished at his remark.

"Yep," said the Wolfer. "You see it's glacial fed, and it will be a foot lower in the

morning from what it is on in the afternoon.”

“Well, I would never have thought of that!”

“O yes. I’ve seen a good foot and a half of difference between morning water and late afternoon water in these mountain creeks. We’ll pack and saddle up and step up lively so as not to have to camp on this side and waste time. Just like me—wasting time! Wasting time! But I wanted to see your shooting.” And they rode at a sharp walk till the rushing of water came to their ears.

“The creek twists so that we have to cross twice,” the Wolfer explained. “It’s rather a close bend here. Up above it can be made almost at any time, except in spring freshet; for it’s low and shallow there. Here we are. Now just let me ride in front and try her.” Down he went to the brink. There all the horses clustered to drink. The drinking over, Dewar kicked his heels into his horse’s flanks but it did not want to wade. It drew away from the water and patiently he turned it back. Again it whirled and he reined it back. In it went head down, cautiously stepping. Out went horse and rider, the horse fumbling for a footing, for the water was muddy and it couldn’t see the bottom. “All right!” shouted Dewar above the water’s rushing sound. “We’ve past the deepest. Drive in the pack-horses

while they're watching me and wanting only a hint to follow." John flicked one on the haunch and in it went. The other wheeled away, but he turned his horse to prevent it going back. It stepped doubtfully down to the creek, splashed in. "All right! All right!" shouted Walt. "He's coming! He's just fumbling. Let him take it easy. It's like a man getting out of bed in the dark! All right."

It was all right. Cautiously the pack-horses followed Walt. John rode his horse after them. They went deliberately, feeling their way, and then all came up with a quick step on the further bank. Walt had his legs drawn up, lifted out of the water; but John trying to follow that example, found himself too stiff, unaccustomed to the saddle for a long time. His feet thrust into the flood and in the creek side, where the water swirled most, he was soaked to above the knee.

"We couldn't have done it an hour later. They'd have been adrift," said the Wolfer. "Well, we'll get on."

Suddenly John's horse, on a narrow part of the trail they again rode into, reared up, sun-fished, dashed back the way it had come. He reined it, turned it, and Dewar shouted to him the one word: "Wasps!" Sure enough they

were all over the beast. He slipped from the saddle and with a switch flicked them off, and the horse knew it was not being beaten. When the last wasp was gone the pony rubbed its white-splashed forehead and nose up and down on John's chest. Then on they went again, the Wolfer singing softly as they rode, singing, humming, quietly whistling.

John began to wonder where, precisely, he was come in these labyrinthine hills. Ever and again, as the trail coasted a slope, he could see, framed in the tops of the trees, distant peaks and high valleys, and one peak seemed familiar to him. But how, he asked himself, could he have seen it before? He had never been there. Suddenly he thought he had the truth.

"Are we not bending north all the time?" he called to Dewar.

Walt's head nodded up and down.

"Yep. All the time," he said in a chanting voice. He was very happy, riding through the wilderness.

"Well then, is that mountain over there, by any chance, the mountain that—"

"That peeps over the last long hog-back behind Jaffery?"

"Yes?"

"It sure is. And when we drop down below here we come to where we wait for Bunt. Mac-

Intyre Creek rises to the back of that peak you used to see from Jaffery."

Suddenly a long shrill whistle cleft the quiet.

"A man whistling!" ejaculated Jack. "Will it be Bunt already at the place you arranged to meet him?"

Over his shoulder, gravely gazing on Jack, Dewar replied:

"Whistling marmot."

"Oh!" said John, and felt ashamed of his question.

Then he looked up again and there was Walt still twisted in the saddle, reading his face. As their eyes met the Wolfer laughed, and John felt no annoyance; he was not, in the ordinary sense, being laughed at. He thought that though Bunt and Walt might not be able to "hold down" the intense quiet and the vastness of the wilderness without squabble, he could ride through the wilderness with Walt without any acerbity.

The highest woods were bright in the sun; but a shadow began to creep in all the bottoms, a shadow that would not lift again that day, a shadow that would darken into night. And down into the shadow they rode, the rub-a-dub of a falling water sounding nearer the while.

"We're coming to another creek," said Jack.

"Coming back to MacIntyre Creek again,"

explained Dewar, "near the head of it. We ford again there but it is only a splash through at a very broad and shallow place. Then we're back on the side of the creek that we started out on and it's only a little way on to where Bunt is to meet us. He's to go on the Seven-Up road and then down an old trail that we figured (when we were up with the survey people) would come down to MacIntyre Creek."

"Will he be there before us? Will we have to wait for him?"

"If he didn't prolong that drunk of his in Jaffery that he got on after I removed my restraining influence he should be."

They rode down out of the woods on to what was like sea-beach, shingle banks and bars, and the creek ran past in various prattling channels. A sifting blue shadow, beginning of dusk, was there, although high above the peaks were bright.

"Where is he?" murmured the Wolfer. "There's a sign of horses being around recently. Maybe he's gone to a better feed-place for them. Guess he'll have left some note on a stake somewhere if he has."

The two pack-horses clattered ahead over the stones to drink. The riders followed. The saddle-horses crunched over the little rocks, and with a motion of their heads as of a man

with a collar that galls his throat, to draw the lines loose, drank gustily. Jack slackened knees, somewhat saddle-stiff. Walter was looking round at the signs.

"This is an old placer-working. It's deserted now. There are some old mouldering shacks on the other side in the woods." As his horse drank he examined, frowning, recent signs of the passing of horses from the further bank.

"Bunt sure came down that draw and forded here," he said. "On that earthy edge there you can see where the horse-hoofs went along up creek on this side. I'll give him a shout." And he flung up his head to shout.

But at that moment a voice rasped very definitely:

"Throw up your hands, you Walt the Wolfer! Quick! And you, young fellow, up with your hands!"

There they sat on their horses with their hands held aloft like two people engaged in some pagan ritual, some attitude of veneration for the great forests round them.

Then two men came out from the bushes across the creek, each with a rifle in hand, and splash-splashed through the water, one with eyes very coldly focussed on the Wolfer, and the other considering Jack.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE THUD OF A SIX-GUN

DEWAR gazed down on the man who had given the order of hands up from the scrub of the opposite shore, and been the first to wade across, looked down on him with a grim expression.

"What's the idea?" he enquired.

"Speak when you're spoken to, and don't be fresh," said the man, a heavy fellow with bleary eyes, elephantine legs, a loose large mouth.

The other, quite a different type, emaciated almost, with cheek-bones and hollow of cheeks very marked, but a springy step, danced up on the shingle near Fiske.

"Now, Walt Dewar, we'll come to the point. We want you to tell us just where that prospect of old man Bush's is."

"Prospect of old man Bush's?"

"That's it."

"You looking for it too?" asked the Wolfer.

"And looking for you."

"O I know where I've seen you!" broke out the Wolfer suddenly.

The man started a little.

"Wondered how you knew my name. I know you. You are Sid Stevens, and for ten dollars to a doughnut I know who put you wise that I had gone to MacIntyre's Bluff. You're one of Carl Scott's outfit—hooch-peddler, boot-legger. Where did he 'phone you from? Did he 'phone you from Eagle Bend?"

"I'm a what?"

"You seem to be a deaf man. Don't my voice carry to you? If it don't step closer."

"Take that revolver off the horn of your saddle without any fuss to open the sheath, and drop it," said the heavy man.

Walt did as ordered.

"That young fellow over there got any shooting iron on him?" asked the man recognized as Sid Stevens.

"Don't seem to," said he of the dancing step.

"Seem!" grunted Stevens. "What's the good of 'seem'? Look and see; and if he tries to drop his hand splash a shot into his head. It ain't particularly serviceable to us. This is the man that knows."

"No, he's got no shooting iron on him. There's a rifle on that pack-horse over there."

"Well, feel his hip and see if he's got a little automatic or anything."

The man did so, clapping Jack's hip and side-pockets.

"No; he ain't heeled."

"All right."

Sid Stevens resumed his talk to Walt.

"Now, Mr. Dewar, he said, "we are in on this old man's prospect. It ain't anybody's—yet. We're in on it. Do you give us your word to guide us to it?"

The Wolfer smiled pensively on him.

"Do you give me your word to shoot me up when I've done so?" he asked.

"You don't trust me! You won't let me and my partner in on this prospect?"

"No siree! I don't trust you any further than, as my friend Bunt would say, I could throw a bull by the tail."

"Well, then, our other proposition is that you just tell us where this prospect is, lead us to it, and get no share at all. You trust us for that."

"I could sure! But I'm not going to guide you to it, even if I know where it is."

"Then you'll have to die right here. You know! And you're going to tell us."

"I guess you'd shoot me up there—if I know where it is—and if I guided you there. It

would tickle me a whole lot more to pass in my cheeks right here without any more journey and leave you guessing—that is if I know where it is.”

“Do you mean to say that you don’t know, that you’re only out on a hunt like for a needle in a haystack?”

“Me? I don’t mean to say anything. I’m never any great talkologist.”

A jay suddenly, with a loud cry, swept down toward them and with another scream whirled away side-wise.

“Well, get off your hoss. We’ll see just how long you’ll remain gay and think we have no say-so over you.”

That was what did it. It was the suggestion of any one having a “say-so” over Dewar that made his eyes blaze. With his hands still over his head he swung from the horse, and then down came one hand slap on the barrel of Sid Steven’s rifle.

“You stand too close, you fool!” he cried.

The rifle went off. The horse spun and waltzed. Grasping the rifle firmly with one hand Walt caught the lines of his horse a moment with the other, thrust a shoulder against its flank, and so brought it between him and the dancing man who guarded Jack. And as his hand came back from that it shot out at

Sid Stevens. At the same moment as he hit out with the one hand he yanked upon the rifle he grasped with the other. A blow and a wrench, and he had the gun.

He was not lacking in presence of mind. Up went the rifle to his shoulder, down went his head in a quick gesture to peer along the sight—at the other man, not at Sid. He was quicker than the cadaverous member of that two-some hold-up. Both rifles rasped, the lean man's and the rifle of the heavy man that Walt had made his own by a wrench and a blow. But they did not fire together. Dewar was first. The lean man's rifle spoke only as he fell, or rather as he leapt up in air as if on spring-heels.

All this abrupt action took place, it seemed, in less than a second. Sid Stevens had not time to recover from the smash of Dewar's fist under his jaw which sent him lurching, before his partner was face down on the shingle, man and rifle clattering down together. The echoes of the two shots leapt upward in that quiet, stabbing, rushing. The next shot to wake the echoes was of a different quality altogether, less steely, more like a tremendous muffled clap of a giant's hands. How to describe it? A *thicker* detonation seems the only way to convey it.

And it came from Bunt who dashed, in a blundering run, out of the scrub up creek. He held a Colt in his hand, and his hand moved like that of a man cracking a whip, and down came the gun, and then the thick compressed noise, a thud of sound. After all John Fiske was seeing one of the methods of "gun-play," seeing how a man who really had the knack could slam down a gun. But Jack was then occupied chiefly in quieting and reining in his mount. By the time that was done and he looked round, all was as before. The creek whimpled past in its diverse channels between the humps of pebbles. The forests stood up stately and were full of the chatter of squirrels and chipmunks in high agitation.

The horses were quieting down, staring, as if wondering what had disturbed them. With a lurching gait, and an odd motion of his hand before his eyes, as if brushing away cob-webs, Bunt rolled on closer and looked at the body of Stevens on the shingle. He had fired at him just as he rose, scrambling, after Walter Dewar's hasty blow had sent him on his back on the shingle.

"He just got up, got up," Bunt hiccoughed, "like a skittle—and then went down;" he began to laugh thickly. "All down, all the skittles are down!" he chanted. "Set 'em up in the

other alley!" Then he brushed before his eyes again and looked at the little twist of clothes that was the other man, the lean, the cadaverous one who had guarded Jack. "What a thin skeleton of a man that was!" he said, glaring.

Then, in a voice as of one with a large lozenge in his mouth, he enunciated carefully:

"Drunk—or—sober—I—can—sure—slam—down—a—gun!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

BUNT GOES TO SLEEP

WALTER DEWAR stood looking thoughtfully at Bunt, his head raised, a finger stroking the under side of his jaw. He took off his spectacles that had slightly misted and breathing upon them polished them carefully with a small piece of cotton he kept specially for that purpose. Carefully he put on and adjusted the spectacles again. Then he looked round at a horse that moved over the shingle toward the grassy edge of bank between beach and woods, frowned at it. It limped. Fiske noting the direction of Walt's frown, wondered if a ricochet splash of lead had perhaps hit it. Slowly Dewar walked after it, but not immediately behind it lest it grow excited again and hasten off. Some of the horses were still nervous in their movements, distraught. He strolled along parallel with it, came level with it, spoke soothingly to it, stepped up to it, and stooping ran a hand down the leg that limped. But the horse did not lift the leg in response to that motion, so he bent again and caught the

fetlock and pulled. Up came the leg and he held it between his knees. It had not been hit by any fragment of lead. A pebble had become lodged in the hoof. That was all. Stooping he selected a stone from the beach for use as a hammer, gave a swift clip, hammer-fashion, with the stone in his hand and the pebble that inconvenienced the beast fell out. Dropping the leg Dewar stood up, clapped the horse on the neck and it looked round at him in that big-eyed way of a horse with one who looks after it, noting him.

Even in a moment of that kind Walt could think of his horses. Some men, it struck Fiske, would be only ready for bed and calling in a doctor, to administer a sedative. For himself, the excitement over, he felt a queer squeamishness at the pit of his stomach. Something was happening under his heart like indigestion. He knew the meaning of the phrase: "And his stomach turned."

"Where are you camped, Bunt?" asked the Wolfer.

"Camped? Camped? O, up the crik a piece. There's better feed up there for the horses. Drunk or sober I can think of the horses. Say, Wolfer, you and me in a scrap would sure make a crowd!" His utterance was thick as though he had a large candy lollipop in his mouth.

Then he smiled, a sickly smile and said slowly: "Drunk or sober I can sure slam down a gun."

"Well, we'll get along to the camp, then, Bunt. How did these fellows get wind of us? Did you blab when you got a skinful of Carl's imported Five Hundred Star Blend?"

"Me? Guess again. Why, we were watched, you and me—and Larry Shanks too. Maybe Shanks blabbed just by his behaviour, going out and coming back that foolish way, starting off with supplies as if he was off for months in the mountains and just camping up the hill a piece and then coming rubber-necking back to find out where we were!" His drunkenness did not prevent his mind from having a grasp of their affairs; but there he paused, and, with a beaming and foolish smile, announced: "Drunk or sober I can keep a secret, and slam down a gun."

He brushed invisible cobwebs from before his eyes again and stood solid on his legs, but his body was swaying from the waist.

It was at that moment that one of their horses whinnied and a whinny replied from beyond up the creek.

"Better get the packs off before they think of having a roll," said Dewar and walked after the straying animals.

Jack, with a glance at Bunt, followed. Bunt

remained there still swaying from the waist, peering after him, waving his hand, head lolling, and smiling as though suddenly aware of some one he recognized passing by.

"Something particularly loathsome about a drunk in the woods," murmured the Wolfer as Jack made up on him.

"And yet," said Jack, "it seems a trifle compared with two men lying dead, inert in that way, just like two stuffed dummies. What will you do with them?"

"The coyotes will see to all that," said De-war.

Without another word they made up on the horses and began to unpack and unsaddle at the meadow's edge. The other horses, brought there by Bunt, raised their heads and watched proceedings a moment, then went on with their tearing of the standing grass of that place, dried to natural hay. Apart from the rumble of the creek there was only that sound again—the tearing of the grazing horses and their gusty snorting now and then through their nostrils.

Suddenly Jack was arrested by a sight a little way further along the meadow. They had both noticed there a spread ground sheet and a roll of blankets where Bunt had evidently made camp. As they were unpacking he had lurched along the creek-side back to that place and

what John stood staring at was Bunt, head back, draining a large black bottle. He took the last drop and then with a wild gesture flung the bottle from him. It spun in an arc, glinted in the light, was shattered against a mid-creek boulder. Walt, who had noticed the end of the incident grunted and remarked:

“Well, that will lay him out finally, I expect.”

Having voiced that opinion he seemed to dismiss Bunt from his thoughts.

“Better perhaps,” said he, “not leave these two stiff backs there for the coyotes. It would look better for us, if anything transpires, to be able to say—and prove—that we had given them,” he paused and then in a dry voice ended: “Christian burial.” He stood lost in thought a moment, fingering his chin. “Bunt was to bring pick and shovel. I wonder where they are?”

He wandered over to where the pack-saddles of Bunt’s string were stacked beside a pile of his truck under a water-proof sheet, raised the edge of the latter and drew forth a shovel, which he shouldered.

“Well,” he said, “He’s been systematic enough. Everything neat and a credit to a camp-maker. You stay around here till he flops out unconscious, just in case he gets up to any pranks first.”

Away he went, shovel on shoulder, and a little later Jack heard the rasp of it as it was thrust under stones, on and on, steadily. The sound of a disturbed pebble in the opposite direction caused him to turn his head. Bunt still sat on his blanket roll, humped, head intermittently dropping forward, and then brought back, jerkily, as in a series of brief doses.

The sound did not come from Bunt. It came from the meadow's end where a big, loose-limbed man on a horse, of that horse-colour called blue, was riding out of the woods. It was the click of the hoofs on a stone that had attracted Jack's attention.

The newcomer seemed for a moment astonished to see the evidence of a camp and the horses dotted over the little wild park, forest encircled. He nodded to Jack, gave a "How do," and reined in, then he looked over at Bunt who paid no attention to him, frowned at that humped figure a moment, as though thinking Bunt was ill, a sick man; but as Bunt sat up suddenly, only to sag again, head rolling, he realized the truth.

"That hootch-running outfit of Carl Scott's seems to have paid Jaffery a visit recently," he said.

As John was nodding his head to indicate: "It looks like it," Walter came strolling back,

shovel under arm. His gaze was expressionless on the unexpected new-arrival.

"How-do," he said.

"I was thinking of camping here," the big loose man said, "but I see your partner has been hitting the bottle. Perhaps I'd better ride on. That stuff has a way of making folks unpleasant."

Walter just nodded, then looked at Bunt.

"He'll soon be knocked out by it, by the look of him," he gave the opinion.

"Bad scheme, bad scheme to bring bottles into the woods. I'm a pole-and-post man. I always say to my men: 'I don't rule over you in town. But I'm boss here in the timber and I can have no bottles in camp.' Said that even in the days before prohibition when the stuff was supposed to be better. It all has much the same effect though. 'Hit it up in town if you like within reason,' I'd say, 'and remembering there are other folks in the world, but no bottles in camp!' You washing this creek?" he enquired, nodding to the shovel, "Any colour showing?"

"No, we're not washing here. We're going prospecting further up."

"Well, you're sure going into a wonderful country. I bin up there looking at the tim-

ber. I'm thinking of getting a timber limit up there for poles and posts."

"Did you come in by MacIntyre's Bluff?" asked Dewar.

"No. O no. I crossed the creek here, took the old placer trail from the Seven-Up road. But I guess I'll go back by MacIntyre's so's to size up the road for the best way to get my sticks out."

"Well sir," said Walter, "I just wonder if you'd mind letting me spraddle four horses of Tom James on to the trail ahead of you so as to make sure they keep moving. Otherwise I won't give them their little scoop of oats they expect so that they may think a whole lot of going home down the trail. I've just been trying to figure when to start them off so that they get to the ford when it doesn't seem too deep for them."

"Is the ford bad, then?"

"Not exactly. But they mightn't go in alone if they came when it was full and they found a grass-pocket around handy. It cannot be made now."

"All right. You spraddle them ahead. I'll see they keep in front of me and camp for the night this side of the ford. Guess I can make it before it's too dark."

Suddenly Bunt rose up and balanced, and

hands on hips peered at the pole-and-post man, moved a palm before his face, hic-coughed.

"Well, I'll get on and camp somewhere farther down in the woods then," said the man of the timber interests.

"Sorry we can't be more hospitable," said the Wolfer. "But you see how it is."

"O that's all right. It ain't your fault. Well, you're going up into a beautiful and inspiring bit of country away up there. My, O my! I just sat there staring yesterday. I was up in the big sticks and looking across and up to rock-slides. Not a sound but rock-slides now and then, and marmots giving their warning call. It's sure majestic. Been up there before?"

"O yes. I came in once from the plains on the other side."

"You can make through there?"

"Yep."

"Never been there," suddenly spluttered Bunt. "Never been there! Damn liar! Don't you believe him, sir. He's only one of them fellows wants to say he's been everywhere. What you say you been there for when you know darn well you haven't? And say, who's this man? Who's this anxious inquirer, asking questions like he took us for an enquiry bureau?"

Say, stranger, just you pass your word you won't say—"

"Shut up!" interrupted the Wolfer.

"Jar loose! Jar loose!" said Bunt. "I was dreaming we were followed up by two stiffes with rifles. Guess it was a warning dream. This fellow ain't going to blab— I'll see to that!" and his hand fell to his six-gun, then went up.

The pole-and-post man put heel to his horse, swerved it round and reared it up.

"Bunt!" said Walter in a low voice with a rasp that carried. "Drop that gun!"

Bunt's hand came down, but he did not drop the gun.

Walter walked toward him, and the pole-and-post man muttered: "Be careful, sir. I know them like that."

Dewar paid no heed.

"Give me that," he said quietly.

Bunt looked at him a spell, then grinned, and handed over the gun.

"Now," said Walter, "you got any more whisky?"

Bunt breathed deep and exhaled a long trembling breath through his nostrils.

"Fetch it out," said the Wolfer.

Bunt lurched sidewise on his blanket roll and produced thence another bottle, unopened.

“Hand it here.”

Slobbering he handed it to Walter who took it and tossed it over on to a knoll a few feet away, then turned and said: “Hold your horse, sir.” Then he held the revolver in his hand in a way new to Fiske entirely—neither of the ways he had had exhibition of, held it up about level with his waist and with his left hand on the hammer made a quick series of motions of the palm upon it. There followed a rattle of shots like a brief fire of a machine-gun. The revolver was empty, and the bottle was smashed to atoms. The pole-and-post man clapped his horse’s neck, held the reins tight.

“Poof!” he ejaculated. “It smells like a blend of coal oil and ammonia. Some shooting and some tanglefoot!”

The heels of the horses on the meadow rub-a-dubbed in a circle as if they wheeled in a circus.

“Now lie down on that ground sheet and go to sleep,” said Walter.

Bunt lurched sidewise and rolled on the sheet.

“Well sir,” said Walter, “seeing you’ve been good enough we’ll just get those horses of James’s all set spraddled ahead of you.”

“All—right. And excuse me. What’s your name, sir?”

"Dewar's my name."

"My name is Lake."

"How do you do, Mr. Lake?"

"You certainly handle a six-gun, Mr. Dewar," said Lake.

Walter merely smiled slightly. And far over at the ground sheet, sinking down, Bunt remarked thickly: "Drunk or sober I can sure slam down. . . ." His voice tailed off and he himself slammed down with a snort into semi-consciousness, mumbling some words to this effect: "You let him go . . . may have to kill others . . . kill him . . . all right. I can sure slam down—"

His head fell back, oblivion was over him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JACK FISKE SEES STARS BY DAYLIGHT

SADDLED, but not bitted—the lines looped up and tied securely to the saddles—James's horses were driven ahead of the pole-and-post man to where the trail went up from the shingle into the woods. Close to the bank Jack noted (but then he knew to look for something of that kind) two heaps of rock that had not been there on their earlier arrival. Lake, the pole-and-post man, saw nothing of disorder or unnatural. The horses, each with a slap on the haunch, quick-stepped away into the cathedral dusk of the woods.

Lake leant from the saddle and shook hands with Dewar, then with Jack, and turned his horse. It dug its hoofs down, went up the bank to the trail, and Walter and Jack returned to their camp. Bunt lay on his back snoring, with a puff at the end of each snore, and every now and then moaning in a tone as of fighting the powers of darkness, calling in a strangled voice: "O God! O my God!" Walter took a blanket from the roll that lay near and cast it

over his partner, also raising his head. Under that he folded a coat, as a pillow, and loosened Bunt's neck-band, for his face was apoplectic.

"O—O—O!" moaned Bunt.

The horses, easily tearing grass, looked more attractive than the human being.

"We'll camp up at the other end of this meadow," said the Wolfer. "It's a disgusting, harrowing, horrible spectacle."

So they moved away a hundred yards from Bunt, there built their fire, there carried their water to make tea in the billy, and heat the canned peas, fry the bacon. Walter meditatively mixed the dough for the flapjacks, and Jack sat on a blanket beside him watching the leaping flames and the ants scurrying briskly in the grass in some of their last activities for the day. Occasionally a squirrel chattered with a sound like some one springing a rattle. An exquisite late light seemed to smoulder in the grass, moved away. Twilight fell there even in the open, a twilight like impalpable blue dust sifted out of the forest. The note of the creek seemed to change a little, deepen (perhaps because of the sounds of fly and grasshopper having ceased); now and then it had a suggestion of voices talking in its flow. A chill fell, the summer night being cold at these altitudes, and Walter felled four firs, clipped

their branches for mattresses, and used the shorn stems for poles to make a fly tent, or lean-to. There they lay, their blankets spread on the fir-feathers, as in a reflector, and the fire, with a big night log drawn on to it, crackled bravely before them. They talked little, each in his own way subdued by the wild incident of Sid Stevens and his cadaverous partner.

"Well, well," said Walter at last, "guess we'd better turn in," and he sat up from the reclining position, propped upon an elbow, in which he had watched the fire-flames and smoked, sat up and slowly unlaced his shoes, preparing to turn in.

Jack's eyes were heavy with sleep, and despite the sense of horror over that recent incident of the attempt to hold them up, and Bunt's voice coming across the meadow to them now and again with its: "O—O—O—my God!" he fell asleep.

They were awakened in the morning by Bunt standing over them, a billy-can of water in his hand from which he quaffed long and greedily.

"Hullo," he said. "I didn't hear you fellows arrive. Dreaming! What a dream I've had—thought I was just in time to look after you. You were held up. All mixed it was; but you were surely held up."

Walter and John gazed at him curiously. So

he was unaware of the truth of his dream!

"Got over your bat?" asked Walter.

"Bat?"

"O that's all right. Don't look so astonished. Man, you're hoarse with it. Your throat betrays you if nothing else. And this ought to be a lesson to you. What would you think if your dream was true?"

"True?"

"Yep. You shot a man last night. As it happens it was well and good and fair, so to speak. But you don't know anything about it. You wanted to shoot up a perfectly innocent man too."

"Did I smash up that bottle of mine lying there?" asked Bunt.

"You look back and recall your dream, as you call it, and try to figure out what happened."

Bunt looked shamefaced at that and asked no more questions, went down to the creek, refilled his can and drank quarts of water with a horrible eagerness, like some water-famined brute. He came back to their fire as they were cooking breakfast but refused to eat anything when Dewar thrust toward him the dish with the flapjacks, light, just browned to a crisp exterior.

"Can't eat, can't eat!" he said. "What happened last night?"

So Dewar told him all. He shook his head.

"Well," said he, "it looks as if drunk or sober I could come on deck at the right moment."

"O there's nothing much for you to crow about," said the Wolfer. "You came in fine and dandy all right, but you could have done the same sober; and you wouldn't perk up and clap yourself on the back if you'd seen yourself lying over there last night—besotted!"

"Besotted!" blazed Bunt.

"Yes, besotted," said Walter and calmly rose to lead in the first pack-horse for the loading.

"Well, drunk or sober I can sure slam down a gun," Bunt reiterated after him. "And that reminds me—where is my gun? Seen it?"

"I have, and I'll keep it for forty-eight hours. I've seen you recovering from a whoop-up before this. You're not to be trusted with a gun."

"Think I would shoot you?"

"Don't talk foolishly. You might shoot yourself in your maudlin penitent fit when you can't get any more. By heck, I'm no preachologist, but if I couldn't take a drink without looking like you I'd cut it out."

He led over a horse and began carefully to spread the saddle-blanket.

"Well!" said Bunt, and rose to begin his packing while John moved off across the meadow to bring over another horse to where the stack of saddles stood.

It was cold in the open. He wondered how Bunt had slept with only one blanket over him and no fire. Cold and sharp! And then suddenly the sun came up over a ridge. Its brightness rushed over the grass, and immediately the cold fled, speedily almost as the flying night-shadow of the great hills above. By the time he led back the horse the flies were already out in that new day's sun-glow, humming past; drone of bee went by; a grasshopper clicked before him.

"Wonderful, wonderful morning," said Walter as he returned. "It's like the first Chapter of Genesis up here. It's only men that make a mess of it. God's country! And by the force of circumstances we've got to go and turn it into melodrama! Wouldn't that jar you? Wouldn't that get your goat?"

John Fiske merely tried to look sympathetic, wagged his head up and down. An unusual man, he thought, this Walter Dewar, this "Wolfer from the Plains." A queer fellow! An unusual man indeed!

Bunt was queer that morning, but in a different way. When all was ready for departure he suddenly kicked his heels against his horse and rode off on the continuation of the trail up creek, the very picture of aloof misery, taciturnity. Walt and John drove the new pack-string that Bunt had brought here before them and, on their new mounts, followed. John rode last.

Again they twined on a narrow trail through the deep timber. Here and there trees had fallen across it—low, to be stepped daintily over by the sure-footed horses, or high, when the riders sagged in their saddles and stooped, passing under.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” said Dewar, at one part, turning in the saddle. “Isn’t it wonderful? And here am I, who by all the heart in me and whatever I have of immortal soul, would rather be with Thoreau, our good American Thoreau, watching the wood-chucks play, or with Burroughs watching the jays and the red-headed woodpeckers, or with old John Muir high in the Sierras, hanging on to a tree, like a bobolink on a reed as he said, just taking in the beauty of it, here am I riding along with a dipsomaniac tough ahead, a rifle I should have cleaned out at that camp, and was too sick of it to clean, two dead men to the credit

of the expedition already, and a boob bringing up the rear!"

Then suddenly he reined in.

"Pardon me!" he said "Pardon me! I fall to brooding sometimes, without liquor. I fall to brooding often in the mornings. Pardon me for what I said. I take back that 'boob.' I didn't mean it."

John's horse came about level with his and stopped only because of the narrowness of the trail.

"That's all right," said John Fiske quietly.

The Wolfer looked at him with expression of grave regret, then gave a little clicking sound to his mount and rode on.

And John (odd though it may seem, perhaps—or perhaps not!) felt no shred of offence at that word "boob." He realized that Walter Dewar was a man who knew the pain that has pained many who feel Circumstance stronger than they.

Again Dewar halted, and when John rode close held out his hand.

"I'm no gush-ologist," he said. "You saved my life when Larry Shanks was trying to play wild west over at Jaffery. I'm sorry for anything I said just now that might hurt. It's perhaps my darned discontented morning-mood only. It doesn't seem good enough to me

that a man should always be tangled up in trouble. It gets my goat when the world itself looks so good. 'Shake!'

But John had taken his hand as soon as it was held to him, and had remained grasping it and shaking away with attempt to give assurance that he understood and felt no bitterness, all through the speech. The Wolfer nodded as one contented and again rode on.

The pack-horses, seeing that the two riders did not follow close, had halted to eat saskatoon at a patch of them, putting their heads to the bottoms of the stems, throwing them up in air with quick motion, and so clearing the berries off branch by branch. As the riders made up on them they tossed their heads quickly, each tore a branch away, and jogged on.

Jack laughed at their comical appearance. There went the whole string, each horse winding into its mouth a branch, with twig, leaf and berry together. And as they rode Walter and John picked berries from the saddle and ate too. Bunt rode on miserably, far ahead, and out of sight and sound. About noon they came out of the timber into a V-shaped wedge of bush and grass where a tributary creek of MacIntyre Creek came down from a wall of mountain to right.

"We can eat lunch here," said Walter. "A good place." And then: "What's this?" he asked.

The "this" was a stake driven into the earth with a slit at its top end made by a cut of a knife, and in that slit was a piece of paper. He took the paper out, and read words scrawled on it in pencil.

"*Going right on. Don't want to eat lunch,*" he read. "Well, that's being sociable by correspondence anyhow. He's not feeling too bad with humanity, however bad with himself. But I guess we want to eat."

"I guess we do," said John.

The riding and the mountain air had given them both an appetite. By that precipitous little creek-side with its border of grass they camped, and spent a leisurely hour and more. They were just riding after the pack-horses, started again, into the next long slope of woods, when a hail brought their heads round together, abruptly.

Behind them, coming out of the woods that they had ridden through, they saw two riders, one bulking large on the saddle, one short. They were riding hard but, as Walt and Jack came to a halt, having heard the shout, they slowed down, dropping from quick lope to slow lope, from lope to walk. Dewar loosened the

flap of the holster of his six-gun that hung at the saddle-horn, and then gave a grunt of disgust.

"What is it?" asked Jack.

"We should have kept that rifle of yours on your saddle, instead of packing it again on a pack-horse. Too late now. The pack-horses are strung right on into the next chunk of woods."

As the riders who pursued them drew nearer they knew shooting irons would not be required; for the man in the lead of these two riders was a big man, bearded, wearing a soft slouch hat. Another few feet of advance and they saw that for certain it was Tom James. He reined in, and his horse's flanks went up and down like bellows. Behind came to a halt also the other rider, the horse heaving in short regular movements of quick breath—and both stared, astonished. For the rider of that horse was none other than Miss James, boyish-looking in riding breeches. A heavy coat of the kind called Mackinaw, as well as a grey-blue blanket too, was bunched at the cantle and she rode with sleeves of a rough grey camping-shirt rolled up.

"Had to come after you, Walter," said Tom James.

Dewar merely looked at him with pensive gaze

and enquiring eyes, puzzled. Then he looked at Nancy.

"It sounds by your voice like trouble—and yet you brought her along," said he.

"To be out of possible trouble back there was my reason for letting her come," said James.

"Letting me come!" ejaculated Nancy and laughed.

"O you Calamity Jane!" ejaculated her father and looked at her with a gaze clearly of pride. Then turning to the Wolfer he said:

"It's none of my business, Walt, what you are doing up here—none at all. But it is my business in a human way—and a friendly way, if I can say it without seeming to slop over to you, a man who objects to slopping over. I've come along after you to warn you that if it's a picnic you think you're out on you've got another think coming. It's liable, to my mind, if I am a judge, to be a funeral."

"Gee-whiz! Up against it again," murmured Walt. "And we wanting to ride along thinking of Thoreau and Walden Pond, and old John Muir! Well, Tom, you're a friend all right. Say on. What's the worst of it?"

"Do you know a man named Carl Scott?"

"I sure do. He came out on the stage from Jaffery with us," Dewar explained.

"He did. And he's come back from Eagle Bend, and he's not arranging for running smuggled hootch this time. He's after you."

"O the clever guy! After me?" and the Wolfer smiled.

"Yes, with five other men too. A tough-looking bunch. That's six to two—too much odds for any man to look on at. That's why I started out to tell you; but when I met the horses with that pole-and-post man, Lake, I knew it was six to three—seeing you'd met Bunt already and sent my horses back."

"Did he tell you anything about Bunt?"

"He said you were camped with another man."

"Was that all?"

"Yes. Why?" asked James.

"Didn't he say what the third man looked like?"

"No."

"Oh!"

"Has Bunt been at his old game? I thought prohibition—"

"He has had his share of Carl Scott's last consignment from over the northern border."

"That man Lake didn't say a word. I admire him for that too. Well, Bunt's no use to you in that shape now. So you are practically

two to six. You've sent Bunt back have you?"

Walt gave a dry, mirthless laugh.

"Drunk or sober Bunt can sure slam down a gun," he replied. "No. He's away on ahead a bit—and drunk or sober he can sure slam down a gun."

"That sounds like Bunt talking, as if you were quoting him."

"I am. It's a quotation and no doubt about it. But the less you know the easier you'll sleep!"

"Well, that Carl Scott is certainly the king-bolt of many a crooked scheme. Since prohibition booze-running has been his chief occupation. It made me smile when Nancy told me of him coming out from Jaffery sitting cheek by jowl with Judge Davenport. Funny old galoot, Davenport—deep as the sea, with the manner of a timid old lady at a city crossing. Well, Carl Scott has come back from Eagle Bend with five beautiful cronies. You know that door with the curtain hanging over it into our back parlour?"

"I noticed it," said Walter.

"Well, Nancy here was in the parlour. You walk right through it to the kitchen, you see, when serving meals. I guess they thought she had gone to the kitchen, but she was just sitting there till they got through. Well, they

talked. About these clever fellows with the big cut-and-dry skin-games, I've generally noticed there's some hole in the scheme after all. A lot of big Efficiency preachers are like that too. Just at one place they side-slip from their own gospel so badly that all the efficiency they have is burst. She heard. She eaves-dropped. We needn't make any bones about it."

"Yes," said Nancy, "I did. For what I heard was this: That fellow Scott said: 'Well, I phoned from Eagle to Sid Stevens and told him to get Little Ghost-Face Jay.'"

"Little Ghost-Face Jay!" said Walter. "A good name."

"Yes," said Nancy with a nod. "That's what he said: '... told him to get little Ghost-Face Jay, and get out after the man Bunt, wherever he said he was going. Bunt's to meet Dewar back in the hills.'"

She paused and James, glancing from her to Walter remarked: "So you see you're liable to have two more as well as six."

"That's all right. They're fixed."

"Fixed? You mean—but wait a bit. Don't tell me. I don't want to know. I see now that the less I know the happier I'll sleep. I don't want to hear about the two who followed Bunt. Well anyhow, Carl Scott had it all fixed up.

He'd phoned to another man, he said, Cyrus Eholt, to keep tab on Larry Shanks, and if Larry went out of town to follow him. O he had everything cut-and-dry. So Nancy brought me the news, and then went in and cleared up and took a dollar from each of them instead of the usual seventy-five cents. Made me smile! She has a wild little way with her sometimes." He wagged his head at her.

"Wild!" commented Nancy. "I should say. 'Why, miss,' said Scott, 'it was only seventy-five cents yesterday going out.' And so I just said: 'Owing to increase in cost of labour our charges are raised.'"

All smiled at Nancy's tones. The moment had its tensity but amusement was not blotted out.

"That's what," said James. "I heard her. So I came strolling in. If he had a kick coming he could kick to me; but no, no kick! Well, they wanted horses and I told them my horses were mostly out and that I doubted if I could supply them as I had a note from a sportsman in Chicago who comes out every year hunting, and he wanted me to reserve him certain sure, a string of pack-ponies. They looked at me as if they were thinking of how the chances were to knock me on the head and take the horses I had left. But I lit a cigar and looked

at them and they had another think coming and went over to see old MacIntyre. He had no horses for them so they pow-wow'd a spell and looked across at me. I was sitting at the door with a pull through cleaning out my rifle. Then they went off to Gallaher's Ranch, two miles back on the road to Eagle. And then, I had a little confab with MacIntyre. He and his son reckoned they were able to police MacIntyre's Bluff if they made any trouble coming back. They'll get horses, I'm sure, at Gallaher's. And that's the whole story. I left Mac's son, Charlie, bucking wood close to the hotel gable and MacIntyre slipped six shells in his six-gun. So Nancy and I got out and here we are."

"Well Tom," said Wolfer, "I'm no gushologist, but you make me want to gush on you. You are surely a friend. And say, Nancy!" He shook his head at her. "Well I guess you'll be safer here perhaps. These guys might try to be fresh."

"We're both from the Big Prairie country, Walt!" said James. "We've seen the same foothills on the other side, and know the same men, and talked of the same horses, and ridden in the same round-ups. I guess it's a form of patriotism with me. You needn't gush about it at all. I guess you'd do the same for me."

"Sure," said Walter, clapping Baldy's neck. "Well, you'd better get back then, Tom, and see that you don't meet them on the way or they might guess you'd been after us to warn us, and Carl Scott, with the opportunities of a lonely meadow or a deep big cañon and the big timber to leave a dead man in, isn't a nice man to meet."

"We're out riding our range—our darn hilly range!" said James laughing. "Nancy is surely a cow-girl to the life. It's a different proposition from the prairies. Strings will go wandering along the top meadows and hunt another meadow. You never know where they are. That's why Nancy and I are up here, don't you think?"

Walter gave a rueful glance.

"No, I don't," said he, "and neither will they. I wouldn't meet them if I could get past without it if I were you," he advised. "You skidoo, Tom. You skidoo. Got grub to take you back? You're travelling light, I see—only a Mackinaw coat and a blanket on your cantele."

"O we'll fish a mess of these little cut-throat trout in any pool along MacIntyre Creek going back, and have them with a flap-jack."

"Then skidoo, Tom, skidoo. Sorry to speed the parting guest like this, but I'd hate to get you tangled in my troubles. If you don't

skidoo at once we'll just have to come back with you for they'll have got their horses and you'll be sure to meet them."

They shook hands. It was a very solemn hand-shake and Nancy's hand felt very small to John Fiske as he took it and pressed it as if afraid he might break it.

"So-long and good luck," she said cheerily, looking more like a boy than ever as she and her father wheeled their horses.

They rode off on the back track at a gentle walk, while Walt and John passed into the next deep slope of trees that decked the long declivity of the hillside there.

The Wolfer was wrapped in silence. Fiske glanced at him and saw a solemn fixed gaze in his eyes as of one in deep thought.

Suddenly, riding last, and looking round for a final view of the departing father and daughter entering the woods, Jack gave an exclamation and reined in his horse.

"What is it?" asked Walt.

"Look back!"

They reined in and sat there in their saddles just at the timber edge and saw two riders who had left them at a halt on the slope of grass and berry-bush; and approaching Tom James and Nancy, in a semi-circle, were six riders who had come out of the last timber belt.

"We can't leave him in the lurch," said the Wolfer. "That's a nasty looking contretemps over there. They've stopped them!"

"Yes, they have."

"See them riding round them?"

"Yes."

"What do you think? Should we leave it to Tom to bluff them and not show a hand until something happens, or should we show ourselves to let them know that Tom is not alone? This is a question of strategy. I'm no strategy-ologist. If I was alone I'd ride right out with my holster-flap buttoned back. Lord, how a woman complicates life!"

"Well, don't let me make you act differently," said John. "If we don't show ourselves we can watch. If they let Mr. James go past—good. Surely they will, especially seeing he has his daughter with him."

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. You and I would, because of a girl being around. But will they? If they don't let them pass easily we're an awful long way from them—too far off to get into the mix-up. They got their horses quick, those fellows. I took it for granted that ranch James mentioned was a long way from his place. Didn't know why! Just got that hunch. Say! see that? One of them is riding his horse right up to Tom. I know

those intimidating gestures. Say, you can ride after Bunt and warn him, and get him to ride back in case he's wanted—and slam down his gun. I'm going to lope into this pow-wow. There's no man going to haze a woman when I'm around."

He raised his line-hand as he spoke, and tapped the rein on his horse's neck, gave a twist of a thigh to turn it. Next moment it was back out of the timber, loping along the hill-side.

"He's acted too quick, too quick," thought John, "Carl Scott's gang might try to intimidate James; but they daren't do more! Well, he can't go alone."

Thrusting his heels against his horse's flanks he hastened on after the pack-string with one aim only in his mind, to get his rifle and return. But as he made up on the pack-horses they began to lope, thinking it the right thing to do. He "whoa-ed" and "steadied," but on they trotted. The timber was too thick to get round them.

"Whoa! Whoa!" he shouted to them.

On they cantered.

But at a deadfall, where they had to slacken down to pick a way through he made up on them. The horse on the pack of which was his rifle was last in the string, and with a sigh of thankfulness he drew the rifle from under

the rope. Of cartridges he had half-a-dozen in his side pocket, and the rifle was, at any rate, loaded. As he rode back he made sure of that, opening the breech, slowly, so as not to eject a shell if one was in the barrel. Yes, there it peeped; so he closed the breech again and with a shake of the lines came riding back.

As he drew near the sloping patch of grass he heard the rasp of a shot. His heart caught a moment and then leapt with excitement. Another shot followed—or echoes jumping from rocky cleft to rocky cleft. He could not be sure which. Riding out of the trail through the timber on to the open grassy slope, before he could even size up the field and discover the significance of the scattered riders that he saw and the rearing horses, bang went another shot.

Down crashed John's horse, and down went John, saw a sudden blaze of stars in a sudden darkness. It was as if he fell into night suddenly, a night in which a rocket went up and burst. Then all was blotted out. He was, in the slang phrase, "dead to the world."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WOLFER TAKES A COLLECTION

WHEN Jack came again to consciousness he had the impression of looking through a telescope the wrong way round. Far off, it seemed, and through a small circle, he saw a group of men sitting together. It widened, still more and the focus became more normal. The group of men bulked larger, came nearer. He heaved a long sigh which made them all turn and look at him.

Opening his eyes wide the first man he saw clearly was Walter Dewar lying on the ground in an attitude he could not understand. It seemed an attitude of leisure, of waiting. The Wolfer was perfectly at ease. Then a man (and he recognized him as the traveller on the stage from Jaffery, who had sat upon the other side of Judge Davenport) said:

"You've come round. All right. You'll be able to join in the pow-wow."

"O-ho-ho!" said Dewar in a bantering tone, pretending regret. "And I was having my desire. Here was I watching the ways of the ants

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for a good ten minutes instead of mixed up in the big affairs of men. You sons-of-guns are too melodramatic for me. What do you come shooting the smell of smokeless powder into the scent of the balsam for? One thing these ants teach me—if we want to tag a moral on their story—is patience. Patience, gentlemen. Patience, Mr. Scott. This fellow here that I've been watching specially has been hauling along a beetle that's really too much for him. Its weight hauls him down little hills after he's got it up to the top, and he just gives his legs a shake and begins again. Moral: patience. We'll win through."

"You'll win through a whole lot better if you understand we're serious," said Carl Scott. "All this joshing won't help a little bit. We ain't joshing."

"O I can see you're deadly serious!" said Dewar. "So am I!"

Jack looked at the five men who sat round with Scott and felt that from none of them was hope of kindness. The big bearded Tom James, with his back against a boulder, one of the tough-looking cronies of Carl Scott beside him, sat grim and meditative. To John his face very plainly, without words, announced: "You'll suffer for this—all of you!" He wondered what had happened while he had been re-

covering from the blow on his head. The blow pulsed in his forehead. He felt a great lump upon it. His horse had been shot and he, thrown forward, had dived upon a rock. Then he noticed that Dewar's right hand was bound in a handkerchief and that beads of perspiration, the sweat of pain, were on his face. And where was Nancy?

All that had happened was that James and Nancy had been told to throw up their hands when Dewar appeared, riding from the woods. Then they had been searched for "shooting irons." They had only one rifle with them, chiefly in case they met game, and that had been taken from them. As Dewar came riding toward them, to be in the trouble that might come to James, one of the men, seeing his hand go down to loosen the holster flap, had imagined he was going to shoot. So he fired, and the bullet hit a wrist bone, splintering it, but ricochetting. As James broke out with: "What are you shooting for, you fool? He ain't pulling his gun!" Nancy had ridden aside a little way and then suddenly, digging her heels into her horse, and quirting, all in one quick movement, had ridden off across the meadow and into the timber on the trail towards home.

The Wolfer, with a yell part of anger, part

of pain, had then swung his left hand over to draw the gun from the unbuttoned sheath, drooping the lines, but before he could get his Colt free, Carl had him covered. Not only Carl, indeed. Most of the others had a gun in hand, and for a moment James thought he was going to see Dewar filled with lead. But it was not a dead Dewar these men wanted.

Dewar, however, was the only one they wanted; and when Jack appeared riding out at a gallop one of the men (Cock-eye MacClintock) simply threw up his gun, calmly sighted, and touched trigger. The horse reared, received the shot in its forehead, and over its head went John, crack on a stone, and the rocket-display followed. And here he was now with that display over, and the darkness passed through, back again in the light of the sun. He felt dumb, miserable, helpless, and oddly cold despite the brightness of the day.

"Well, Dewar," said Carl Scott. "You say you won't tell us where that prospect of old Adam Bush's is. Now I got a way to make you cough it out just as prompt as possible."

"Oh?" said Dewar.

"You may say 'Oh?' " mimicked Scott. He turned to the man who had shot John's horse. "It's a good thing you didn't shoot the kid," he remarked. Then he paused and to Walter

Dewar explained: "For we've got him to shoot right here if you don't cough up where the prospect is. Got that?"

The Wolfer drew a long deep breath and his glasses seemed to gloom, the eyes behind them grim and sullen of expression.

"Now look here," said he. "If I tell you I'm only out on chance looking for it, with no clear notion at all where it is within a matter of fifty square miles—in air lines at that—and in a country all dips and peaks, hog-backs and cañons, and ravines, you just wouldn't believe me. You'd go and shoot him up; and still I couldn't tell more than that."

Scott pondered, gazing at him reflectively, his mouth twisting. A look of cunning spread on his face.

"We'll chance that," he brought out at last. He lifted a hand and flapped it toward Walter. "Maybe you're a poker-player and a bluffer. Well, bluff or no bluff, I give you this way of it. You may know, or you may not know. If you refuse to tell—we shoot him. If you say definitely you don't know, why we'll shoot him anyhow. There! Think it over."

Then a queer thing happened to Fiske. A great madness filled him, a madness, a rage, at injustice.

"Shoot, then!" he cried.

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He glared at Carl Scott. The Wolfer's head went up in wonder.

"Shoot!" said Fiske again. "You'll swing for it too, I guess, if you do."

"O no I won't. We'll cover all up so that no one will know."

"I wish," broke out one of the men, "that that young lady in the riding breeches hadn't ridden away."

Scott frowned at him.

"I was just remembering her," said the Wolfer softly. "I didn't need you to remind me. An awkward witness that. It is all right, Carl Scott. You need not look at your friend as if you'd like to eat him for saying that. It was in my mind too."

"Well, well," said Scott, "you'll realize that there is all the more need for you to tell us just where that prospect is in a hurry. Just you get busy."

Dewar heaved a long sigh, and bending took up a twig, then sat twisting his lips, and feeling his chin on the underside with his left hand.

"Well," he said, "see here," and he made a long winding scratch in the earth. "Here's MacIntyre Creek."

They came closer to look.

"Here's MacIntyre's. Here's the bend be-

low us. There are two graves just at the side of it. Two men are buried there."

"Well, I never knew that!" ejaculated one of the men who was evidently conversant with the neighbourhood. "Was that in the time of the old placer-workings?"

"No," said Dewar quietly. "It was quite recently. Just up against the edge of the woods the graves are. It was some dirty business, and they were shot up, and buried there."

"Get on with your map," said Scott, roughly.

Dewar made a little heap of dust with his hand, then pointed west, and down hill.

"That's that peak over there."

They all looked across at it.

"You get your bearings by that," he continued. "Now there's the top fork of MacIntyre Creek. It comes down off that peak; and here's the other fork. Here's our present position, right here. Now what you're going to do is this—" he raised his head, gazed up at the sky, blinked his eyes as though they were strained behind the glasses, and sat back.

"What you are going to do is this," he repeated, but his voice was hard. "Throw—up—your—hands!"

And from behind, among the bushes, Bunt's voice shouted:

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"Up with them prompt! Quick! Don't move, you!"

All the hands were elevated. White, haggard, with blue hollows under his eyes, Bunt came close to the circle. He laughed a horrible laugh.

"I tell you what," said he. "Drunk or sober I can sure slam down a gun!" Then he stood and laughed again at the circle.

"We did that very well, both of us," said the Wolfer. "But the prize goes to you. When I saw you doing the snake in the grass act I decided I had to entertain these gentlemen so as to give you every chance to get close. But you can let that gentleman over at the rock put his down, Bunt."

"Why?"

"He's not in Carl's push."

"Gent with the beard like Joaquin Miller?"

"Yap. He's an old friend of mine."

"Why! It's Tom James! Well, Tom James, glad to see you again. Excuse me holding you up too. Well, gents all, I can't scrutinize any of you too close and personal for keeping tab on all of you as a bunch, so to speak. Anybody breathe over-deep and his name is Dennis. Tom James, will you oblige by making the collection? Reduce the armament of this bevy of stiffes if you please. Now, now, mister, you

with the cast in your eyes—you're moving a little bit and I can't tell accurate what you're about because of that squint. It is sure an aid to a boxing man to have a cast in his eye. But it's sure a serious handicap to you right now. You want to breathe as easy as possible. I got to keep special tab on you. There's somebody moving behind me. I can hear. Who's in the bush?"

"All right," said James, rising to make the collection of the armament. "She's a friend too."

"She!"

At that word all save Bunt looked round. And Nancy, a little paler than her wont, for she was of the open air, and browned in the red of her pretty cheeks, rose up out of the bushes.

With a chuckle the Wolfer rose, casting down his twig.

"All right, Tom," he said. "You don't need to soil your hands, or mix up in this at all. I'll collect the armament."

But before he began he walked over to the man called Cock-eye and jerking his revolver from its sheath said:

"It was you who caused my tenderfoot partner here to get that lump like a hen's egg on his forehead. And you shot a darn good horse while you were at it."

He whirled the revolver up in the air and caught it as it decended, by the barrel.

"Just you have a short sleep and a hen's egg on your head yourself," he said, and tapped the six-gun butt on Cock-eye's head. Down the man sagged like a toppled sack of potatoes.

"Steady now, gents, steady!" warned Bunt to one of the men who moved slightly. "Say, Walt, just feel that fellow there. He's got no gun showing but he's got a shooting iron somewhere I think—the man wearing the big Mack-inaw as if it was mid-winter in the Arctic.

Walt stepped to the man indicated, ran a hand over him—and drew a small five-shooter Colt from his side-pocket.

"Nifty little gun," he remarked.

"Very pretty," said Bunt. "Now, gents, I'm going to tell you all I've been drinking. I've been drinking some of that hootch your king-bolt, Mr. Carl Scott, has been running in to this section, and the after effects of that tanglefoot is to give me a head throbbing like an automobile. I've a temper that makes me so that I could bite into a chisel. I ain't fit to think but I am sure fit to shoot. Me, all alone even, I'm sure a crowd today. Shooting kind of appeals to me when I'm like this. Drunk or sober, or getting over it, I can sure slam down a gun. Walt will do the thinking while

he's stacking your assorted weapons away out of your reach. What will we do with them, Walt?"

Dewar felt his chin with his left wrist, the revolver standing up oddly before his face; his right hand was evidently painfully in need of attention.

"What will we do with them?" he said, stressing the "will." He seemed to consider the point. "I know what I'd do with them if Tom James wasn't here. You can be glad, you people, that Tom James and Miss James are here."

And then he showed himself as the same man who openly spoke of having been mixed up in a hold-up, a burner of his boats (in the adage), for said he, caring not that they should know, leaving the future to look after itself:

"Your two friends, Mr. Scott, that you telephoned to, telling them to go after Bunt, had a little accident down creek there—a big heavy boob of a man and a man like the ghost in 'Hamlet.' Theirs are the graves I alluded to."

Scott raised his head with a triumphant smile.

"You smile too quickly. I give you all the aces but I can beat you! By the way you look you think you've got one on me." He thrust his head forward. "If that's how you look at it perhaps I'd better get quit of you as a pos-

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sible witness." Up went his left hand, grasping the gun.

"Don't you—don't you!" said Scott. "I swear I am mum."

"Huh!" growled Dewar. "Now you see the kind of boss you've got, you fellows. 'Don't you! Don't you!' " he mocked. "Well, what will we do with them?" he asked of the air.

"You got to think that out," said Bunt. "My haid ain't fit. I'm only good to wish it would stop throbbing, and always good—drunk or sober—always good—"

"To slam down your gun," said Dewar. "Sure, we know all about that. You hear that, gentlemen? He means it too. Now, just let me think what to do with you all." Then he looked at Nancy who had stood tensely beside her father. "It's a shame that you should see all this red and raw stuff, Nan—Miss James," he corrected himself, in some subtle feeling of respect for her, calling her by her surname before that wild gang.

"Don't mind me Wal—eh—Mr. Dewar," said she. "Consider me as being invisible. Just you act as if I were not here. It's not a woman's place to handicap any man from doing right because of any mock-sentiment," and then she heaved a big sigh and nestled closer to the big shoulder of her father.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A NECK AND TAIL PROCESSION

A GRIM silence fell on the hillside. A grasshopper or two clicked in the grass, or veered over them like flung castenets clicking in the air. Wild bees boomed by; wasps balanced in one place, darted, a flick of yellow, and balanced yonder.

"I've got it," said Walter. "Did you ever hear of neck and tail?"

All eyes were on him at once.

"Nothing serious," he said. "It's not a form of torture. It's the term for a method of leading a string of horses that don't want to go the way they are wanted to go. That's all."

The circle of men looked at him curiously.

"Well, you'll all mount; and your horses will be tied neck and tail so that no one can skidoo without all stampeding together, and I'll accompany you to MacIntyre's Bluff. From there you'll take the stage out to Eagle Bend, and you won't get off anywhere en route. Further, you'll go out of Eagle Bend when the train comes in. I shall telephone to a friend of

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mine there, telling him to expect you, to see that you arrive on the stage, and to report if there's one of you short. Also he'll report if any of you don't go out on the train. But he won't report to me. You'll hear direct from him. Carl Scott—you'll understand this. You are a man who knows about little combines. You have friends in Grand Forks, B. C., and Roosevelt, B. C., and in lots of places on the auto routes through Washington, and Idaho. Now I have friends too. And so has Bunt. Haven't you Bunt?"

"O, I have a friend or two," replied Bunt, with a lightness more vocal than a vehement assertion. "Some of them are in Eagle Bend."

"Now gentlemen," said Dewar, "I wouldn't like to be the man who gets off that stage between MacIntyre's Bluff and Eagle Bend. And I wouldn't like to be the man who remains in Eagle Bend. Eagle Bend is getting to be quite a sizable town—big enough for sandbags." He lifted his left hand (having culled all the weapons, he no longer held a gun, leaving Bunt to do that) and made a little gesture in air. "The man who loses the first train out of Eagle Bend after the stage gets there will stay in the cemetery after a coroner's inquest has been held on him and passed a verdict of death by misadventure. Now don't forget it. Bunt and

Jack will go on and see that claim of old Adam Bush's you're so much interested in. Bunt knows more about mineral than I do. They'll restake it, if it is what the rumour says; and none of this little outfit will have a thing to say about it. Got that, Carl Scott?"

Scott only sat, chin on chest, staring at him.

"Have you all got that?" The Wolfer inquired. "Anybody that hasn't got it fixed in his mind, and forgets that it is unhealthy to drop off the stage on the way to Eagle Bend, or to stop over in Eagle Bend, will find himself in a dazed state with a harp in his hand before he well knows what caused the sudden change of scene and occupation. Now I'm going to tie your hands behind your backs or Fiske and I are together. My right hand is out of commission. If I was sure who fired that shot I'd shoot him up; by the way—I can shoot left handed. So don't try to break away when I'm taking you back. Let me show you."

He stooped, took up a revolver from the heap of lethal weapons in the stack beside him, and laid it at his feet. Then he snatched Carl Scott's hat from his head, threw it high in air, bent quickly, snatching up the gun with his able left hand, and as the hat still soared shot at it again and again, tossed down the empty six-gun,

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strolled over to where the hat finally fell, lifted it, and slapped it lightly on Scott's head again, bullet-riddled.

"A little souvenir," he said, "and also a little object-lesson. Four in it before it got a chance to hit the ground. This is not my *métier*, as they say in France. My heart is all for the simple life, but if people demand gun-play from me I can do it. Come on then, Jack, give us a hand to tie these gentlemen's wrists together. We'll tie 'em in front so that they can hold a line or grab a horn if necessary."

James and Nancy had been talking quietly together and suddenly Nancy cried out: "No I can't. I'll ride along with you. I can't go on ahead alone."

Then her father made some quick response.

"I'm scared to go alone!" she broke out.

He put up his head and laughed. He knew she was not scared to go alone; but thus she had her way.

"All right. Nancy and I will stay with you," said James quietly to the Wolfer, stroking his beard.

"That's good of you, Tom, but I don't want these people to bear you any grudge. You are not in this at all. I've no doubt they think

you warned us that they were on our heels, instead of believing that you were only riding up to the meadows with Miss James to look for strayed stock. But I want them to see that this is all our little affair—Bunt's and mine. Got a knife, Jack? Here's a tether-rope we can cut into sections to truss them up."

The man called Cock-eye had come round from the stun of the blow on his head with, sure enough, an egg-shaped swelling to match that on Jack's forehead. He stared dazed at them, and Fiske felt a pity for him, a horror of the whole wild affair.

A chuckle from the Wolfer distracted his attention. They all glanced following the direction of Walt's gaze along the hill. There came the pack-string back, looking for their masters, each with head up, puzzled, wondering if it had strayed on the wrong trail.

Whatever the Wolfer's heart was otherwise, it was sincere with horses.

"Don't they look sweet?" he said.

On they came, as if wondering why Bunt had turned on the back track, came daintily stepping, necks craned, anxious.

"And there are people tell you horses have no sense!" exclaimed Dewar.

They had gone wandering on through the

woods, evidently, for a spell after Bunt, hearing the shooting, had come back. There they were looking for him—and their marching orders!

Then the Wolfer was again grim.

“Now,” said he, “get moving. Anybody who kicks will get a dose of lead,” he growled as if he meant it. “And there are plenty of natural scavengers in these hills, if they do lie low mostly when men are around. We’ve only to move on and they’ll come padding and flying along to do their work. Coyote and buzzard keep the hills mighty fresh. Ever read Bret Harte’s poem on the coyote—‘Friar in orders grey’?”

To that saying no one replied.

Sullenly all mounted the horses that were tied “neck and tail.”

“There, we’re all set,” said the Wolfer. “Sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen, but I’ve to see about one of our pack-horses coming along with us with the grub, for you may want a little snack on the way. We may be held up at the ford.”

Carl Scott’s chap-fallen gang sat there, speechless, waiting his next order.

Tom James walked on and caught the lines of Nancy’s horse which had come back to be with the other horses, and led it to her. She

swung to the saddle. He caught up the trailing lines of his own horse, threw them over its head and mounted.

"So-long," he said with a wave of his hand to Bunt and Jack.

"So-long," they replied.

"Good-bye! Good-bye!" said Nancy.

She rode slowly off, Jack and Bunt waving their hats, both looking after Nancy with the expressions of admiring schoolboys.

"All set?" asked Dewar.

No one answered. He moved the holster of his revolver over to the left side of the horn of his saddle, mounted, and drawled: "Get—a—move—on."

The horses stepped up, tied tail and neck. He remained to one side, watching them start, then turned and gave a little nod to Bunt and John.

"Say," said Fiske. "Shouldn't one of us go too? Can Walt handle them alone?"

"Him? You saw him give his exhibition of shooting! So did they."

"True! True!" said John. "But there's that girl."

"Shucks! She's got old man James." He looked after her and the string again. "And if you ask me she's got nerve too! She can look after herself, I guess, pretty good." He

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had evidently recovered from his tremendous first admiration. "I mind the Wolfer once said to me: 'When a man thinks it's up to him to care for a poor little female in the big wild west he ought to brace up and remember she's been looking after herself till the time she met him all right.' You ain't smitten are you?"

"Me? No! O no!" said John.

"You're a queerer fellow than I took you for then," said Bunt. "Me, I'm smitten all right. She's got all kinds of grit, that pretty girl, and yet ain't no less a girl. She's a peach all right. I declare it open and unashamed. She's a peach. The memory of her is enough to make a tough like me swear off hootch for life, all games of chance, and cigarettes."

And for the life of him John couldn't tell whether Bunt was joking or serious, but he had a suspicion that Bunt was "smitten." He kept silence, and that moment they had work to do which occupied all their attention. Their horses thought a general exodus was being made from these wild high places, and fell into line to follow the others, suddenly, indeed, broke into a pursuing lope.

"Whoa you!" cried Bunt, caught his horse, and swung to the saddle.

John, afoot, ran to and fro, helping him to head them off, turn them. By the time that task was completed, and he stood holding the lines of the pack-ponies, Bunt beside him, Scott's gang was gone from sight.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A GHOSTLY CAVALCADE

THUS was John Fiske left alone in the midst of the mountains with Bunt. And there came into his head then how he was there to begin with, how he was there at all, as a buffer between two clashing temperaments. Would he long to turn this now two-some into a three-some? So he wondered for a moment, alone with Bunt. He hoped that, in the encircling of the silent places he would not feel a sense of inability to bear more of his companion, such as he had read of, such as he had heard of, such as Walter and Bunt admitted very definitely when they asked him to accompany them. With the Wolfer and himself all had gone well. John had almost a prayer in his heart that all would go amicably with Bunt too. The big peaks, immediately they were left alone there, had the appearance of rising up another thousand feet, looming closer, and the woods on the slopes seemed suddenly more dense and awe-inspiring.

“Well, you got to use one of them pack-

horses for a saddle-horse now, I suppose," said Bunt. "I'll help you unload him. That one there is about the best, I guess," and he nodded toward a horse of the colour called blue, a dark grey horse that, in some lights, had a marked blue sheen on it.

Together they unpacked the horses and rearranged the load. The saddle was taken from the horse that the man "Cock-eye" had brought down, and Jack saddled the new mount for himself. Bunt sat watching him, lost in thought, till John drew the latigo tight with a pull of his hooked fore-finger.

"All set?" he suddenly enquired.

"Yes," and John swung to the saddle.

They rode apart, up and down hill, to drive the pack-horses on, got them in line and rode on again, Bunt ahead of John now, as the Wolfer had been before. But Bunt had nothing to say for a long time.

Then over his shoulder, he called out: "Here's where I was when I heard the shooting! I just wheeled right around and hit the trail back. I sure had to keep ducking my head to dodge these trees fallen kind of low across the trail. Well, it was a great turn-and-turn-about in that bit of grass and bush-patch, all right."

"You were a marvel," said Jack.

"How's that?"

"You were a marvel, I said."

"O I like it! I'm at home with that kind of thing. I'm no high-brow. The Wolfer has high-brow streaks. He's always saying: 'Give me the quiet life.' Always quoting something about the quiet life from some writing sharp. Batty on a writing man the name of Burroughs that could sit and converse with blue-jays all day. But he's a jim-dandy with a six-gun, when, as he says, circumstances force gun-play upon him. Did you see—of course you did—the way he plugged that Carl Scott's hat. Gives me a pain when he sits talking like a sewing-circle about— O, I got all their names. I've heard a lot of it—Burroughs and old John Muir and a guy named Thoreau. This Thoreau was a friend of wood-chucks and wild flowers. Shucks!"

They were rapidly mounting higher and could look out between mountain-side cedars to distant high valleys opposite, long wedges of green marked with patterns as of lace, falling creeks and their tributaries on far precipitous slopes. Then the trail wound and only the immediate woods were with them, distant glimpses blotted out, till, abruptly, the trail

led out on a plateau and there lost its distinctness, all those who had ever come over it evidently taking different ways, spreading out.

Jack Fiske made no response, merely wagged his head when Bunt looked down at him to be sure he heard. Silence was best, thought Jack, in such questions of low-brow and high-brow and questions of taste.

"Never been up this way before," said Bunt. "Over there is a trail through. I know that way," and he pointed to the opposite ridge. "It comes into this basin on the other side of all these intervening hog-backs and little hills, away across."

"Was the Wolfer with you then? He told me he knew this upper country on a bit."

"He did!" Bunt laughed drily. "Did he tell you why he was up here?"

"No."

"He didn't! Well, that's a wonder. He just talks right out sometimes—the way he did to Carl Scott about those two stiffs back there—as if he was hunting trouble. Spits right out, calm as calm, what most men would keep mum about. Him want to sit and watch the trees grow, and the big white clouds pass over, or words to that effect! Didn't he tell you what he was up here for?"

"If you refer to a hold-up he did mention that."

"Of course he did! Well, we headed in from the plains over there, and aimed to get out south some ways. Didn't know about this trail, and darned if the word hadn't been passed over the wires about us and a bunch came up this way and got across to the other side and held us up." He reined in and pointed out above the million tree-tops. "Over there it would be about."

"He didn't tell me all that."

"No? Well that's how we came up there. It was only the hold-up he did tell you about. He just says that kind of thing casual: 'It was the year after I got out after that Big Prairie hold-up . . .' like that."

"Well, there's nobody following us now," said Jack, "and we are on a legal enough job."

"I guess so. Adam Bush had no relatives left of any kind. His claim just naturally lapses even if he'd registered it. But he hadn't registered it. We re-stake it. That's all. No; I guess we're all alone in these almighty mountains now, unless, maybe, Larry is somewhere in this darn mix-up of ridges and gulches and trees and creeks, out looking for the prospect when he thinks the Wolfer and me have quit the country.

"I can tell you about that," said Fiske. "He rang up MacIntyre's Bluff on the telephone, pretending he was the sheriff, and asked if Dewar was there."

"He did! And what happened?"

"The Wolfer answered the phone and recognized his voice, and disguised his voice and told him that Dewar had gone right out to the railroad."

"Well! That's one on Larry Shanks. He would believe all the more fully then that I was going over the divide clean through to the prairies with the whole outfit. That's fine. That means that Larry Shanks won't ring in anybody else for protection and company for himself to come out with him, on the idea of safety in numbers. All the same I'd be sorry for any one who did go in partnership with him. He's not to be trusted any further than a man could throw a bull by the tail," he paused. It was one of his tags with a tail. "And that's not far," he added. "Well, Larry ain't like to go any ways but alone," he went on. "He would hate to share anything; he's mean and small is Mr. Larry Shanks. It's sure always a case with him that there ain't going to be no core! Say!" he suddenly ejaculated.

"What?" asked John.

"Suppose that Carl Scott has a little outfit

of his hangers-on told off to keep an eye on Shanks! We'll get to the prospect all right, but Shanks may come along and bring a whole pack of trouble with him when he arrives."

"Isn't he the kind of man to be pretty nasty himself when he arrives?"

"O pshaw, I can work him up all right with taunting remarks till he grabs a gun and then—I can sure slam down a gun quicker than Larry!"

"He seemed to me half crazy anyhow," said John. "Crazy thing that was of him pulling a gun right in Jaffery before the Tremont."

"He wasn't going to fire!" exclaimed Bunt in tone of contempt, either for John imagining so, or for Shanks acting ridiculously.

"Well, he looked to me to be crazy. I'd think him fit to ambush us and just shoot from behind a bush if he could."

They had crossed the plateau, every tread of a horse crushing down Alpine flowers, or the springy stalked red bryanthus, the "false heath" of these uplands. They had a view of forest-tops below by the league, twists of creeks glinting white here and there in their awesome and dark green depths.

"Look!" and Bunt pointed. "Right over there is where old Bush's prospect is. You see we're on the summit here. That water is run-

ning the other way. We're past where the hills drain to MacIntyre Creek. Here, them pack-horses don't know which way to go. We'll have to bunch them first. I'll go down, and you go up, and we'll get them together."

Away he rode, circling down hill while John circled upward. As they did so a great eagle, slowly craning its neck, humping its shoulders, soared up from a rock. Above again a marmot whistled its clear whistle of warning. The horses bunched together.

"See," said Bunt, "I'll ride ahead to lead 'em, and show them the way. You can wait behind and see them all string after me. The trail goes round the edge here, and down into them woods."

Bunt rode on, coasting the edge of the hill of false heath and boulders. The horses, nervous-looking there, as though the altitude affected them, raised their heads and glared; then one, and then another, followed him. The third remained tearing grass and John rode close to him, flicked his haunch. He snorted and went after his fellows. On the hill's edge, coasting round on its further side, the trail again showed clear, but in places rock-slides had rushed over it.

"The trail's all wiped out here with a slide," Bunt shouted, "but it goes down at an angle

anyhow. We're liable to slide a bit. I'll go ahead to give them courage, and you holler to them if they kind of pause too long and get rocks round them too thick."

Off he set—as it were fording the rock-slide, keeping his horse in motion, but for every yard of progress across the hill its surface at that part moved down.

"Head them straight out!" Bunt shouted. "Don't let 'em head down hill into the slide. Head 'em straight out as if you were crossing a crik. They'll slide enough anyhow."

One by one they stepped into the slide. The last hesitated, seeing how his fellows fared—sliding down three feet for every forward step.

"Go on! Get on! Gee there!" whooped John.

He saw that there might be catastrophe if they did not have "horse sense" enough to try to follow the lead of the pony Bunt rode and guided. When one showed sign of drifting too far down without trying to step on directly across the moving rubble John yelled: "Get up! Gee up!" Plunging along, with rocks gliding down over their fetlocks, to their knees, headed straight across the hill, they all came gliding to the side, but still with their heads toward the next solid slope of hill. On to firm

ground digging down their hoofs one by one they came again; and there was the trail once more clear before them. Bunt swung round in his saddle, looking back at their legs.

“Good enough!” he whooped. “Not a cut leg in the bunch! Say, that was some crossing!”

They were almost into the belt of trees below when John, still higher up than Bunt, reined in and said: “What’s that?”

“What’s what?” asked Bunt, and turned his horse uphill again, seeing John’s gaze rivetted on something far off over the tree-tops.

“Is that smoke?” asked John.

Bunt rode up beside him, and peered, eyes puckered.

“Now is that smoke or a kind of haze from some crik-fall over there?” he enquired of the air. “Too blue for foam of a steep fall. Too small for forest fire unless it has just begun. Camp-fire, I guess.”

“Game-warden?” suggested John, hoping for the best.

“Game-warden maybe,” said Bunt; “we could make sure if it was a fire or the haze of foam over a fall by staying here till dark. If it was a fire we’d see a light then. But we’d be no forader then. We better git on—”

He clicked to the halted pack-horses and they lugged on in to the lower trails. It seemed soon as if they rode down into the night.

"Say, it does go dark sudden in them places," said Bunt. "It's all turning blue through the trails. There'll be no more sun down here today. Turn black next, before we know! We got to amble on. We were held up too long over that pow-wow with the Scott outfit. We can't camp here. It'll be dusk before we hit a place where there is water and feed for the horses. There they go stringing around again in this little bit of open place. I'll head them. You keep them going behind."

This time, back on clear trail again, the pack-ponies needed no urging. They too understood, doubtless, the signs of coming night, and had confidence that their human companions would find them grass and water at the day's end. They went down the sloping trail in the dim late light that made the straight soaring cedars spectral, unreal, with drooped heads, loose legs, in a dropping jig-jog motion, after Bunt's horse; and John, sitting back in the saddle with loose lines, brought up the rear. The effect of unreality was increased by the quietness of the fall of the hoofs. There was hardly a sound, the hoofs falling muffled in drifts of clover and bark

and tamarack needles. The bell on the neck of one of the horses, with its little tinkle-tinkle, was the loudest sound they made. It was a ghostly cavalcade in the twilight of the big timber.

Suddenly Bunt stopped and waited till the string made up on him. There they stood, head to tail, some indeed closer, ranged alongside, one or two not having stopped promptly enough on the steep incline. Bunt backed his horse so that the head of the leading pack-pony was level with him. That was one that had a little bell under its neck, for aid in finding the bunch should they stray when unsaddled and looking for feed. He fumbled with the bell, and even while Jack wondered what he was doing Bunt explained.

“Just putting a wedge of Spanish moss I hauled off a cedar in that bell,” said he. “Whatever that was you saw, smoke of a fire, or foam from some steep crik over rocks, it give me a hint. We don’t want to come tinkle-tinkling along through the woods now, telling any possible folks that we’re coming, till we see who the possible folks may be. Most people wedges the bell when travelling anyhow. It kind of bores them to hear it tinkling on the trail. Some folks it bores tinkling at night. It don’t

bore me. I hear it in my sleep and know all's well, horses not straying. Guess tonight we'll keep it wedged all the same. There! That don't ring. Yes, guess that's a good notion. Folks that know these hills could get in here by that trail over here. I kind of half thought of coming in that way myself after leaving the rest of the horses up near the divide—to be called for, as the Wolfer put it. Half thought of going to the end of the Seven-Up road, right to the mine, and coming in that way, instead of striking down to the old placer camp. But of course the idea was for me to meet you and the Wolfer on the MacIntyre Creek trail. Well! Good thing I did! Good thing I did!" He clicked to his horse and rode on, remarking: "I can sure slam down a gun if anybody does stalk us in this way."

The pack-horses stepped on eagerly after him in the quickly deepening dusk.

"It don't ring any more," he remarked. "We're about as quiet as ghosts on this lonely trail."

As he spoke the silence was less broken than accentuated by a sudden babbling scream. It made horses and men shudder for a moment. A silence horribly cleft—and then accentuated!

"What on earth was that?" said John, still

feeling as if an electric current tingled in his spine and neck.

“O, some cougar,” said Bunt. “What it meant I don’t know. They don’t teach cougar language at the school I attended. Git along, you cayuses! Git along!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“DON’T SHOOT!”

HAD they been mounting up it might not have seemed that the dark came with much celerity. As it was, with every few yards, dropping down into that gulch, it seemed that another wave of gloom washed over them. When they gained the bottom-land the creek that ran there was almost bereft of colour, just a shade of grey with flecks of white dancing on it. There they had to camp despite the closeness of the trees.

Said Bunt to the horses when they were all unsaddled: “Well, I hope you find feed somewhere.”

They pushed their way down to the creek and drank, and with a great smashing of fallen and rotted trees got back to the trail again. Thereafter they crashed in a desultory fashion to and fro while the men prepared camp. A fire was lit under a tall cedar and still the horses plunged disconsolately back and forth. Then Bunt produced the oat-sack, and the

beasts, looking campwards to see what he was about, came smashing again through the wind-falls and deadfalls. They knew the oat-sack. Each had his share of half a hat-ful poured out for him, and there they stood munching while Bunt and Jack suppered.

After supper the two men spread a ground-sheet, for it was a damp place indeed, and with all their blankets over them for the chill they slept—or tried to sleep. Bunt was worried, however, by the lack of the horse bell. He missed it in his sleep. He would doze off and then waken thinking that the horses had left them, strayed far. At last he rose.

“You awake too!” he said, peering down at John.

“Yep. The creek noise keeps me awake I think.”

“Huh! The lack of the noise of the bell keeps me coming awake. May as well have the bell ringing,” he growled. “If anybody was around close here they’d see our fire anyhow, and the horses won’t stray far through this.”

But he went a little way beyond the fire’s radiance, then returned.

“They’re not there,” said he. “I thought they were standing around after eating their oats. We’d have heard them if they’d gone

breaking through bush. Guess they’ve gone back on the trail.”

“How far will they go?”

“Back to grass,” said Bunt, and knocking off his shoes got under the blankets again.

In the morrow Bunt went to search for the horses, leaving just after breakfast, and did not return till afternoon. John employed the time in his absence in fishing, and the sight of the trout took the glum look from Bunt’s face when he came back with the string tied tail to head.

“Guess where they were?” said he.

“They didn’t cross that slide, did they?”

“They sure did! Didn’t care for the feed on this side. Too sparse. Guess they remembered the big wedge of grass and bush where they had their long feed when we pow-wow’d with the Scott outfit.”

“Did they go there?” ejaculated John.

“They sure did.”

“You had some hike,” said John.

“O well, we came back good. They had no load, you see. I hit the trail pretty good myself. I ought to have drawn a rope across that trail there, from the creek side to dead-falls, so as to keep them near, but I never thought they’d go back alone over the slide up there even if they went back as far scouting for grass. And after me giving them a bribe of

oats too! Here's more'n half a day gone. Say, these trout look good to my appetite."

He took up a rope and went back on the trail to a good place for making a temporary fence to keep the horses from straying again and then returned to eat. The meal over he went on a little way and stood pondering.

"The trail is clean wiped out here," said he. "It never did lead anywhere but up to the summits on the other side, even in the days when prospectors were hitting out thick from Jaffery and the lively mayor they had then got the government to give grants for trail-making. It is all cluttered up here with dead-falls. Got to use an ax. Hosses can't get on any further. Men can't without an ax." He went ahead, climbing over canted trees, and slithering carefully under others. "We got to go careful on a job like this," he shouted back to Jack. "A man don't want to get caught under a tree that slips, like a bear in a dead-fall trap."

The result of his enquiry into the chaos of bush and dead-fall was a decision that they were "up against it."

"That's what we are—up against it!" announced Bunt. "But the trail crosses—or crossed—up there. It ought to go up the other side. Look, if you fix your eye opposite there,

up a bit, you can just pick out an old blaze showing where it took in. That’s what I think. And look how these dead trees are all a raft along the other side there, and how the second-growth has got a hold underneath. Second-growth ain’t too bad if it’s just willows on a trail, but dead-falls and wind-falls, and devil’s club-foot, and all that stuff!” He shook his head. “We have lost a day, that’s what we have done. Well, I ain’t going to flog the horses for going back looking for feed. But before the day’s done we got to see how to get across. We might fell a tree or two for a bridge right here, where it’s narrow, although the water’s deep.”

He plunged over the fallen trees to the creek side, and walked a way along, looking up at the soaring trunks, gauging their heights and considering the creek’s breadth, eventually selected a tree and began to swing an ax at its base.

“If only we could make a bridge and get the horses over,” he said as he rested after a spell of work, “they’d be all right. There is some food over there I can see, enough for a one-day camp.”

Dusk was threatening again in the big timber when his tree cracked ominously, and then followed a slow rending, a quick crackle of

twigs, the swish of its fall, a thud. It bridged the creek. But then the work was not done. Bunt had the upper side branches to lop and the great tree to level, so that the horses could get a hoof-hold. At that work John relieved him, working out step by step on the tree and clipping as it were a runnel in the midst of it, a little path, or channel, in its wood. Then they had to lead the horses over. The first to be led to the tree was very dubious, but, patiently coaxed, at last daintily crossed. Bunt had led that first horse and John, finding that the others would not follow, led a second one over, wheedling it, coaxing it. Then abruptly the other horses, seeing their masters on the far side, and these two horses at once tearing grass on the bank, decided to follow. They came eagerly, as daintily as deer, across the make-shift bridge unled.

By the time camp was made on that side dusk was swimming in the dip.

“Well, they won’t go back of their own accord tonight, I guess, not on that tree,” said Bunt, “but just in case they want to, and try to, I’ll drive two or three high stakes into the bank this side and make a gate to our bridge. There’s a whole day gone! Well, well! Keep temper; keep temper! The only thing about this keeping of one’s temper is that it is

apt to burst up awful sudden, like a boiler I saw once burst on a lake steamer because they’d tied down the safety valve to help make a freshet current!”

There was indeed a sense of being baulked in sitting down to eat that night only across the creek from their camping-place of the night before. In the morning the horses were all in sight on the little wedge of grass promontory or elbow of bank, and after breakfast Bunt went off to see how the trail looked up through the over-hanging woods. He came back with sullen face.

“We’re only a couple of miles, I guess, by an air line, from where the timber thins out up above, remembering how it looked from the other side, and a man could walk most anywhere over the rocks up above,” he said, “but you just can’t go ahaid here without an ax. This side is sure fierce. But never mind. It’s a great life if you don’t weaken!” He looked up at the circle of peaks peeping over the tree-tops. “What was it the Wolfer called that far end of valley? I can’t remember. Cool something.”

“*Cul-de-sac?*” enquired Jack.

“That’s it. Well we got to keep cool right here.” I wish I’d come in the other way, from off the divide past to Seven-Up mine; and you

and Walt ought to have crossed at that shingle place—at the old placer-working, and gone up the trail I came down till you were on the height. Only he made sure this was what he called feasible. ‘I’m sure it’s feasible,’ he says, ‘from what I hear.’ That’s what he said. ‘Dang it,’ he says, ‘if a posse could go over it only six years ago after us, we can go over it after a fortune called the Good Enough.’ ”

Bunt stood frowning.

“I don’t know,” he went on, “but what it might prove quicker in the end to go right back to that shingle place and up the hill opposite and strike along the summit-edge the other way. Round about here—why it’s sheer e-quatorial forest, half-way up North America! That’s what it is! Folks that don’t do any trail work in these Rockies ain’t got any idea how abso-gol-darned-lutely e-quatorial they are in spots.” He stood breathing deeply, lost in thought. “It’s an awful long way, though—to go back!” he said, to Jack’s relief. But Jack was leaving all the plans to him, offering no advice.

“Well, I guess this may be quicker after all—now we’re here.”

A sudden rumble that seemed not of thunder came to their ears.

They both, instinctively, craned their heads and listened.

“What’s that?” asked Jack.

“Rock-slide,” said Bunt in a casual tone. “We got that to figure on too. There may be a rock-slide up above here to negotiate. Morning sun melts some snow, you see. It falls. It loosens a stone. Stone rolls. Another! Then the whole blame slide gets on the jump. That was sure some slide to hear it that well among all this timber. Well, we’ll get to work. Pity we’ve only one ax. We can take spells, and you can help with the shovel and pick a bit maybe, grading a trail up for the horses. It is sure dense in the bottom here.”

They worked till noon and came back to their camp, torn by the spikes of devil’s club-foot, grimy, to get the spikes out before they caused festering sores, and then, hungry, to eat. They worked again till it was too dark to continue swinging an ax, and still they had not got above the tangle of scrub on that slope.

“Two days lost!” growled Bunt. “Well, we got to keep temper! Keep temper! Keep temper!” He produced his sack of tobacco and sheaf of wheat papers and rolled a cigarette.

“Why, the Wolfer will be at MacIntyre’s

Bluff by now!" broke out Jack, thinking of those two days.

"Sure! He will be there, that's to say, if he ain't started back already. They'd travel swift so as to get clear of that bunch of hootch-peddlers, ship 'em out on the auto. When does she get there?"

"About five o'clock."

"Well, they're shipped to Eagle Bend by now, and Walt is hitting the trail after us! Wonder if James's daughter is immersed in this here love with him now! He's liable to get immersed himself some day and marry—marry and settle! A settler!"

Jack raised his head and glanced at Bunt whose tone was jeering.

"O he doesn't try it! It's because he ain't got much use for the average maid that they go batty on him. He sees through them too."

"Is he cynical?" asked Jack.

"He says no. He says he's only one of the few that ain't fooled. Gol darn! What was that?"

They sat with heads up as if expecting the sound, that had made them both start, to be repeated, listening to the retreating echoes of it

"A clap of thunder?" asked John; but to himself, even as he suggested that, he thought: "No."

“It wasn’t rock-slide then, surely!” said Bunt. “Yet it sounded like rock-slide too at the end of it, in among the echoes of the beginning. Look at the horses.”

They were all alert, but only for a moment. They dismissed their astonishment and went on grazing.

“But what was it?” asked John again.

“Sounded like a charge of dynamite at first. You heard the kind of crack. But the rumble was like rock-slide.”

“Maybe just thunder and reverberation among the peaks,” said John. “I suppose thunder might echo like that up here.”

“Search me! It don’t feel to me like a thunder atmosphere. I don’t like this place at all. And here is two days gone in the middle of the core of it! And me still funny in the head through over-great addiction to fire-water. I’m going to cut it out. Never no more, whether it’s legal or illegal. I’m through. I ain’t said much about it but say—my haid! These last days! My haid! And my nerves! All down my arms! And my laigs! Tingles! And such darn tingles! I wonder what that sound was.”

The stillness that followed was oppressive for a long while. Then again they became accustomed to it, that silence as of Nature a-tip-

toe, holding breath, waiting, waiting. Waiting for what? Waiting for the Millenium? Waiting for some great and wonderful end? The peaks, the clouds, the forests, the creeks lapsing down with a ceaseless tom-tom at falls and sighing sound in eddies and sometimes a sound as of voices calling, through the day, through the dusk, through the black night. They both, after that inexplicable explosion felt the great wilderness almost oppressive.

Next morning, breaking trail, they came to a place where they made more head-way, the second-growth thinned out. The dead-falls were fewer. The horses by that night had practically eaten out the natural feed by the creek-side, and had a larger feed of oats in consequence. A third night Jack and Bunt camped by that rushing grade of water, but by noon of the next day they came back from their trail-breaking to pack and saddle and be off uphill.

Bunt walked ahead leading his saddle-horse, the pack-horses followed, and Jack afoot, leading his horse, came last. They walked thus, instead of riding, because the trail they had cut was, by reason of the configuration of the hill-slope there, often very steep, often an affair practically of a series of steps in the earth made by aid of pick and shovel, Jack working

behind Bunt as the latter swung the ax to clear the path. Higher, they had come on the old trail, or fragments of it, easier to clear. Feed for the horses was not apparent, but both men had a desire to get away from that dip. Each night spent there depressed them. They felt frustrated, balked. To look up at the same trees, the same tassels of Spanish moss, to get to know the place as if it were a living room, to know it in detail of tree and branch, was depressing in that it drove home on them the fact that they were held up, not progressing. So it was a relief to be clear of the place again.

Up they went valiantly over the trail they had cleared, and on to the less wooded upper slope. Here they mounted again, the grades easier. On in the afternoon they had again to have recourse to the ax. The horses clustered back, Jack holding the lines of those that were startled by the swing of the ax as Bunt worked.

“Steady, boy, steady!” he told them.

They became used to it so long as Bunt did not just drop off the saddle too close to the tree to be attacked and swing the ax at once; became used even to the crash of a tree falling backward in the woods, knew that it was only as a signal for them to step up, move

on again. They tore every blade of spare grass that showed as they walked, broke off leaves from bushes that took their fancy, snatching snacks all the day.

"Thank God for cayuses," said Bunt, noting what they were about as he put the ax in place again. "They want just enough oats to make them come into camp now and again—a kind of lollipop for them. But they can get along without it. Some of them don't know what oats is rightly. Say, there's light ahead now. We're getting up in the world again. We're round the bend of my thumb the way I showed you. When we get on top here I'll be able to take bearings easy. We have sure come crashing through this bit of forest! Made more noise than a horse-bell, heh?"

He turned round, laughing over his remark, as if he mused that he who had thrust moss in the bell for quiet's sake, had then waked the echoes of the still wood with so many ax-blows, the crash of so many trees falling.

Even as he turned Jack, behind him, saw something rise ahead. He thought it was a bear, expected to see its bulk suddenly rush from them. But that abruptly risen dark silhouette between the colonnades of fir stems ahead was not of a bush, nor of a bear.

There was the sharp, darting crack of a rifle and Bunt, without a sound, fell prone to the ground while the echo went gliding away through the wilderness.

Then Jack Fiske, without, it seemed, thinking of what he was about, just acting (unaware of himself, unaware whether his heart beat fast, or slow, or clutched), leapt to the pack-horse in the load of which the .303 was hung and wrenched it free from the rope. Up went the rifle to his shoulder and down went his cheek and he sighted. With intense eagerness, peering through the little peep-sight, he quickly got the silhouette clear behind the fore-sight.

“Don’t shoot!” came a voice. “For the love of Sam, don’t shoot. I want you. I want you. I want to speak to you, young feller.”

Jack lowered the rifle from his shoulder, but his finger was still on the trigger. He peered at the man who advanced on him, he also with a rifle at the ready.

“Don’t shoot!” again the man said. “I want to speak to you.”

The voice, oddly strained though it was, as of one tense to the verge of derangement, Jack seemed to know. And as the man drew closer Jack did know him. It was Larry Shanks, he of the queer grey eyes that were so queer that to describe him as a “man with grey eyes”

had seemed to Donovan, of the Rossland Hotel, sufficient description for any one who encountered him to realize who was meant. A shudder did then surely pass up Jack's spine. He had a sense of the horrible, as in a nightmare. There lay Bunt on his face motionless. Alone in these still woods with their pendant moss and the queer grey eyes of Larry Shanks!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE BOWING FIGURE

“**W**HERE’S the other one of your party?” asked Shanks. “Where’s Walt the Wolfer?”

“He’s not here,” Jack evaded.

“Ah! Dead! Did Bunt kill him?”

He asked the question in an easy tone of enquiry. There was no more feeling in it than might be in the voice of an average man meeting one or two partners on Main Street, Jaffery, and asking: “Where’s your friend? Getting a shave? Having a bath? Buying a bag of peanuts, or what?” So it struck John, and in his own tensity he felt an inclination to laugh, a wild laugh. The horror of the moment had unstrung him. But he was not unstrung as was Larry Shanks. Those grey eyes were the eyes of one demented.

Bunt’s horse was plucking at the leaves of a bush, stepping close to where his master lay inert, and John caught the lines, led him aside. The whole string took the movement of that horse as sign that they were to advance.

Their terror from the shot being over by then, they all stepped up in line, winding in their mouths tufts of grass, sprigs of shrubs to their taste.

"That's right," said Larry. "Lead 'em up here. There's hoss-feed at the timber end, and there ain't the same terrible feeling of all the trees looking at you. You can see high up and look at the rocks instead."

He posted along level with Fiske. The horses all passed Bunt without fear, one or two bending their necks and sniffing him curiously as they came to him.

"Well," said Larry, "you are well out of that company." He jerked his head toward where Bunt lay. "Terrible bad company for a young man like you. Your mother would sure be pained, poor lady, if she could have seen you in such damnable company."

John glanced at him. They were coming clear of the timber.

"Crazy," he thought. "Crazy."

Shanks' next remark confirmed the suspicion.

"I'm right glad to see you. Honest I am. I won't pretend anything to you. I'm honest to you, I am. I'm glad to see you out of that evil company. Also I am glad to have you here for myself. I've been in old Adam Bush's tunnel and fired a charge in it too, to see how

the vein shaped. Say! It fair shook the whole hill. But I can't go near his shack. It's got a little window each side of the door, little slits of windows, and the door in the middle. It keeps looking at me. It's just a face, you see, nose and two eyes. And do you know what I think? I think that shack has got kind of human, being up here alone, and made by a man. A nose and two eyes—plain as anything. Did you ever see a shack like that?"

"O yes," said John.

"You did? Well, that's comforting. My son, when I heard all that ax-play crashing down there I sneaked along and had a look and made my schemes. I says: 'I'll polish off that bad man Bunt, and the young fellow tangled up with him (which I communes would sure be a heart-break to his mother back east if she was aware), he'll be my partner.' For why? Because I'm plumb lonely. I can't hold it down. You can almost see the shack now. We're coming to where you can see it. Look, on the edge of that clump of Douglas firs. See the way it looks at us?"

"Yes, I see what you mean."

The shack of logs was set back in the shelter of a deep wood of firs. The windows were glassless, and horizontal slits.

"This man," thought Jack, "has to be

humoured. That's my duty for the time being. Later I shall get back to Bunt."

He clung to the hope that Bunt might not have been killed, clung to the hope that his wound might not be fatal. He made an attempt to get back to Bunt at once by saying:

"Don't you think I should go and see—go and see about burying Bunt?"

"What, don't you think he's dead?"

"Sure. I said bury him."

"O yes. But what you said ain't necessarily what you think. He is as dead as—"

"If you have a shovel handy—"

"I have—old Adam's shovel, and all his tools too. They're over at my camp. I just couldn't go in his shack. He had his tools right in his tunnel. I made a camp over here. Look here, lad, you can unpack here. How you feeling?" His mind leapt from one theme to another with astonishing celerity.

"All right," said John.

"You are. The altitude don't affect you? Well, it affects me. It affected my horses. When they got up here they just started to roll hilarious. And I had a tarnation job getting them up, and the packs off, and then they just rushed around as if the bull-dog flies were on them; but they weren't. It was just the altitude. It affects men and animals both—or

men and *lower* animals I should say. I remember my mother teaching me that. 'Men are animals,' she said. 'Hosses are lower animals.' Your partner is sure dead; I can sure draw a bead."

John shuddered, hearing that, recalling how recently he had heard Bunt's announcement: "Drunk or sober I can sure slam down a gun." He had not disliked Bunt during these days alone with him. In many ways he had admired him. And dead—suddenly dead, cut off from life, this life at any rate, all we know of with certainty!

"I'll help you unpack, my son," said Larry.

The friendliness of that "my son" sounded almost creepy to John. There was something fawning in the way it was said. Larry seemed desperately desirous of companionship.

Larry had pitched his camp out of sight of Bush's shack in, as it were, a bay of the woods up through which Bunt and John had cut their way. Above were the upland meadows and then the precipices, the zig-zag edges of rock against the sky, the wedges of high snow, in shadowed corries, that would not melt all summer. The camp was just a lean-to tent between two trees, with a pile of blankets and tins and sacks stacked there, and before it the ashes of a fire.

"Sit down! Sit down! Squat on the blankets and let us talk. Drop your rifle. Leave it there. You wouldn't shoot me up, nor me you. I ain't a dangerous character, like the men that got you in their toils; that's the words."

Suddenly a twig snapped loudly and Jack restrained a start; then those queer grey eyes of Larry Shanks were peering at him, considering, cunning.

"You made no remark about that twig snapping," said he.

"No. I took it for granted you heard it too!"

"O that's it. I thought you maybe wondered if it was Bunt Bradley—not dead! He's dead all right. That's just a twig snapping with change of atmosphere. That's nothing! All manner of little bits of sounds like that go on in the woods down there all the time. There's one tree down there, when a bit of breeze blows in a certain way, rubs a branch against its neighbour with a sound like somebody saying: 'O! O!' Just like that! Now look here: maybe he offered you a half-share, that fellow Bunt Bradley. The Wolfer was a fool to quit and go out to the plains." He had evidently forgotten his earlier decision as to where Walt was. "I didn't think Bunt would quit some-

how. I wasn't a bit astonished to see it was him coming along when the sound of all that ax-work in the woods came up to me and I went snaking down to the creek to see who was there. Kind of astonished to see you with him sittin' at the fire, but I think: 'That young man will be company for me. I'll give him half-share in the prospect—just for his company. That's me! I'll give you a half-share, for your company. Yes, young fellow. I'll go half-shares with you if I sell this prospect—on condition—on condition—" and he paused, as if to give opportunity for Jack to ask: "What condition?"

But Jack was not interested in the condition. He was merely counting the days and thinking of how soon the Wolfer would come up that trail, considering to himself that the three days' delay in that comparatively little strip of timber, at least as the birds flew over, was maybe highly providential. Alone with Larry Shanks, his policy, he thought, was one of humouring.

"You don't ask the condition," said Larry, his face all wrinkled up like the face of a worried child's. It was an unnatural expression for a grown man. It was the face of one deranged.

"Well, what condition?" asked John.

"Just that you stay with me. It is not good for man to be alone in them tremendous hills. I am kind of unstrung. It's the altitude. My heart too is queer since I came here. Now listen." He leant forward and tapped John on the arm knowingly. The touch made Fiske's flesh creep. It was not as the touch of a man. But what Shanks was going to say who knows? For suddenly he stammered:

"What's that? Wha—wha—what's that?"

Even as he so stammered and sat a moment rigid Bunt had suddenly leapt round the lean-to and was before them.

"Bu—Bu—Bunt!" Larry wailed, in a clutching, stammering voice. "O, B—B—Bunt! You're dead! Go away!" and then he pattered: "Get thee behind me, Satan! Get thee behind me!"

"Dead or alive," said Bunt, "I can sure slam down—" and up went his hand.

But Bunt Bradley, that time, did not slam down his gun. For Larry put a hand to his heart, gave a gasp, gasped again; his face went pallid to the lips, and a blue hue followed, spreading over his countenance. Then his face was hidden from them, for he just crumpled forward, bowed his head. He sagged so until he was like a Mohammedan at devotion when

the Muzzein calls. John, seated by him, stared; Bunt, standing before him, stared too.

"Why, he's dead!" said Bunt.

"And you're not, thank heaven," said John.

"No siree. It was the only way then, though, —to play possum. But look," and he held forth his hat, punctured front and back. "It would have flown off my head and let him know he'd not got me, if he'd used a less heavy rifle. A rifle of that calibre throws and spins the bullet at such a velocity that that's what happens. Look! Left it on my head with just the neat puncture. I kind of got tired waiting down there for you to jolly him along, and either polish him off when you had a chance or wrestle his rifle from him and sneak back to me. Got scared, too, in case his brains might cat-jump and him take a notion to plug you too."

Jack suddenly felt very cold, wet his lips, gasped for breath.

"I guess," he said, "the altitude has—" he breathed with difficulty, "kind of got me too!"

"Say, you want a snort to pull you together. Things are happening too quick for you." It was even so; and the scare of the wild bordering on the terrible, almost horrible, was increased then for John by the breaking out of a series of coyote yelps. Five little yelps here!

Then five little yelps yonder! Then five little yelps elsewhere! He wondered if there were several coyotes or only one. The suggestion of the yelps was of one dashing about wildly, distracted, bank to bank and dashing away—to bark again. Again broke out a series of yelps followed by a high falsetto bay. It echoed like a bell ringing from some chasm of the high rocks.

Jack thought of the Wolfer then—and of his expressed longing to lie in the grass and observe the ants with Thoreau, as it were, or sit in the woods and watch the lives of the blue jays with Burroughs. Listening to the coyotes at that moment, seemed to be an entirely different matter. A tremendous longing took him, unstrung, for the Wolfer to be there. Bunt was a wonderful man for an emergency, but the Wolfer seemed nearer to him somehow. He felt as a sick man then. He drew several deep breaths and ran his hand over his forehead on which beads of sweat, signs of the recent strain, had broken out.

Then the tinkle-tinkle of a horse-bell came to their ears. Hope sprang in his heart. Could it be Walter already? Bunt he knew had wedged the bell they had on one of the horses. Had the wedge slipped out? Or was this the tinkle-tinkle of another pack-horse? Was it

the Wolfer who drew near? So he wondered, longing.

"There's a horse-bell," he said.

"Guess the moss has fallen out," said Bunt. "Or maybe Larry has a bell on one of his horses."

Tinkle-tinkle came the bell again—clearly, this time, from down below.

Bunt stood listening. John stretched back, leaning on an elbow, drawing deep breaths, and again the tinkling came to their ears. Then followed the muffled clump of horse-hoofs treading rhythmically. Bunt stood to one side, looking beyond the fly-tent.

"Well, it is sure somebody coming," said he. "That's no wandering horses. There is a string of them coming at a steady climbing gait."

Tinkle-tinkle! The bell rang very close. Jack drew a breath that did not catch his heart and rising moved aside from that praying figure bent forward, propped by its head, the hat-brim crushed, the crown flattened by the bowing body.

And then again came the sound of the bell, this time in a series of quick little silvery tinkles that suggested, so that they could picture it, a horse quick-stepping at a final steep place, with a flat visible ahead for it.

A squirrel rushed up the last tree of the slope and out on to a limb where it chirped in quick iteration, as it seemed, of abuse; and every time it emitted its chirps its curved tail gave a flick. It looked like some quaint toy to amuse children. So thought John, and again, in the midst of his sense of the terrible, almost laughed wildly. No use of trying to deny it: the strain was telling on him. Then again was a rapid tinkle of the bell, and bobbing up toward them came a horse's head over the near ridge—up and up till the whole horse, pack atop, was revealed.

Next moment up rose a big-four Stetson, and there was Walt the Wolfer trudging to the summit, one hand behind his back holding the reins of his saddle-horse.

It came plunging up behind him, digging its hoofs down with a motion like a slow-swinging rocking-horse. Bunt raised his head and gave the call of the cow-men, that falsetto high shrill cry that seems learnt from the Indian, kin with the coyote's yelp and the ground-owl's whoop. Walt swung to the saddle and flicking the pack-horse ahead with the slack end of his lines rode toward them.

"Just arrived?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bunt.

"I guessed so from your two camps below

and from that bridge—for which all due thanks—and from that new-made trail. Some job you had making the end of it here. That pole-and-post man didn't come so far. I guessed you had broken all the new trail. And how goes all, boys?"

Then his gaze fell on Larry Shanks.

"What in heck?" he ejaculated. He stared at Larry. "What's he doing in that reverential attitude, that pose of obeisance?"

"'Reverential' and 'obeisance' is sure Dutch to me, Walt, but his name is Dennis."

"How on earth did he crumple like that? What happened?" enquired the Wolfer.

"Heart failure," said Bunt, "while he was sitting there like a Turk or a tailor my ghost appeared before him and it was too much for him. He thought he had shot me through my bean." Bunt took off his hat and extended it for examination. "He hadn't! But he was so sure of his shooting that he didn't see me for evidence of a mis-aim—only saw me as a sure-thing ghost. So he just naturally crumpled up."

"Gosh!" said Dewar softly, staring at the humped form. "It's like the way some of the Coast Indians used to bury their dead, folded up, instead of stretched out. And where was Jack?"

"I was sitting beside him," said Jack. "He wanted to keep me for a friend in the big timber. He was just scared of it. He told me he couldn't go into old Adam Bush's shack because it was looking at him with a nose for a door and two eyes for the windows."

"Well, I thought so myself," said the Wolfer. "I got a glimpse of it, riding along here after Bunt whooped. It made me start. It looks like a kid's drawing of 'This is a House.' I can easily imagine a man with high blood-pressure, and high temperature, and a lot on his conscience, looking at it and thinking: 'This is a hoodoo—not a house.' He held you up then?"

"Yes, shot at Bunt and shouted to me not to shoot him. Bunt flopped down and played possum. I was just humouring him along, and wondered if Bunt was alive or dead, when Bunt—"

"Returned from the dead, eh?" said the Wolfer and murmured something about: "The bourne from which no traveller returns."

"Spokeshave!" said Bunt merrily.

The Wolfer looked at him with an expression, for a moment, of some emotion mighty like rage, rage with a blend of contempt. And there came back to Jack's mind very freshly memory of that day when it was explained to him that

because of incompatibility of temperament these two men desired a third party in their expedition, to make them feel themselves less utterly flung together in the wilderness. Walter turned to his pack-horse and began to draw the rope.

"Did you see your bevy of toughs off?" asked Bunt.

"I certainly did. They'll keep moving. I've scared them all right."

"They may think they've one on you about the shooting up of those two guys that followed me. You certainly gave them two aces when you blabbed out about that!" said Bunt.

"They'll keep on moving to Eagle Bend, and out of it." He slipped the harness over the horse's head. It opened its mouth, dropped the bit out, and turned away, shook itself, knelt down and, whirling over, rolled hilariously.

"Funny! He doesn't often do that," said Dewar.

"Larry Shanks said it was the altitude," said John in a voice so oddly even and hollow that the Wolfer stared at him.

"By gosh, John Fiske," he exclaimed, "you look as if you were feeling more than the altitude. You look distraught: And I feel that I've gone so far past eating time without eating

that I could—I could—” he searched for a simile.

“Scrap with a buzz-saw as the saying is,” suggested Bunt.

“Yes!” said the Wolfer vigorously.

“I know the symtoms,” said Bunt. “For the love of Mike let us eat, if it is only chuck we need to make us a happy family. But say, I got feelings myself, and we got to get that effigy off them blankets in front of the lean-to first and out of sight and out of mind as the saying is. Lend a hand, people. He’ll be heavy.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE BREAKING POINT

THAT grim duty over, without a word they went in the direction whence came the sound of a trickling and bubbling of water, went in a speechless procession, each carrying his towel and soap, and washed in a little creek that was really the drainage out of Adam Bush's tunnel where a patch of springs had been struck.

As they returned, refreshed by their ablutions, a sudden tremendous wind rushed upon them, common in these parts at that hour, the hot air of the valleys ascending, the cold airs of the glacier-wedges rushing into their place. The wind poured like an invisible river over the long fields of bryanthus, making them seem as if brushed by a great unseen hand. It bent the tips of the Douglas firs like fishing rods. It roared, canorous, in the thick acres of the big cedar tops, in the forest wedge below them. After the first full force of it was spent a long sighing, as of an infinite sorrow, continued in the tamarack tops and among the needles of the

piners. But it was vastly refreshing too, that wind.

They found another camp-site, leaving Larry's lean-to tent where it was, built a fire, and were soon all busy upon the preparation of the evening meal. They ate and drank without speech at first. Later, as the pangs of hunger were eased, and they sat more at ease and refreshed, gazing over the expanse of the great bare ridges that were then, in that light of the late day, like colossal peaks of pumice-stone and red-coral, the Wolfer spoke.

"You haven't had time, I suppose, to see the prospect hole?" he asked.

Bunt shook his head. Walter nodded his several times, slowly. He put a hand round to his hip and drew forth tobacco and pipe.

"Coming over to see it?" asked Bunt.

"What's the hurry?" said the Wolfer. "One of the truest words ever I read were these: 'It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive.' Let us have a smoke and listen to the wind in the tamaracks. That is better than finding all the Bonanzas and Ophirs and Golcondas." He nodded toward John. "By the way, Nancy James sent her love to you."

John smiled.

"O she did. She didn't say that, perhaps, but that's what she meant. She's the ideal

heroine all right. Look at that bandage on my hand. She did it. Wonderful girl. Can ride a horse, milk a cow, fix herself up by two in the afternoon so that you'd think she had a retinue of slaves, play the piano in the evening, and sing."

"She sings?" enquired John, but somehow hardly interested. Nancy seemed far away. Jaffery seemed far away. Hotels and stores and streets might not have been in the world at all.

"You bet," said Walter.

"Was she trying to rope you with a song?" asked Bunt.

"No siree."

"O you're stuck on her! You're talking too much," said Bunt.

"You think it's as Shakspeare says: 'Me-thinks she doth protest too much.' Well, you're wrong. I'd rather buy a phonograph and a bunch of records than marry a girl for her voice."

"You're stuck on her!" said Bunt.

The Wolfer rose.

"Let us have a look at that prospect hole," he said.

"Thought you didn't want to see it!" said Bunt.

"O that was a long time ago," said the

Wolfer, knocking out his pipe on a heel, standing on one leg by the fire.

"Half-a-minute," said Bunt, "till I get my flash-light."

While he was ransacking in his pack for it, John Fiske was aware of being stared at by the Wolfer with marked intentness. As he met that keen gaze the look passed from Walt's face; he turned away and, gently stroking the under side of his jaw, gazed far off round the tremendous amphitheatre of mountains. That momentary intent look worried John. He was feeling not at all normal, not at all himself, and the scrutiny suggested that the Wolfer saw something odd about him. But back at that moment came Bunt with his electric torch, and they set off along the trail worn by Adam Bush in coming and going between his shack and the prospect. John walked in the middle and there was an airy divigation in his steps. He lurched against Walter.

"Beg pardon," said he, very politely.

Then he bumped against Bunt.

"Pardon me, Bunt," he said.

Bunt glanced at him, on the brink—to judge by his wreathed smile—of making some jesting remark regarding that lurch, but he saw the Wolfer gazing at John, worried. John felt as though he walked not on rocks of the way, but

on a feather mattress, or an acrobat's spring-board.

They came to where the rubble from Bush's labours fanned down-hill, like a lesser rock-slide, into a big natural rock-slide beyond, marched across its level top, and there was the prospect hole with a little miniature creek gurgling out to one side of it. They walked into the tunnel, Bunt with his flashlight in the lead, Dewar then following. The tunnel was cold, even at the entrance, icy cold. The Wolfer stopped and looked at John with that worried expression again and said he:

"Do you think you should come in?"

"Why not?" asked John, and his voice, oddly childlike, caused Bunt to turn and look at him.

"It is darn chilly in these places," said the Wolfer, "and if you got a chill here, tired as you are—" he paused.

Bunt was now frowning on the young man as Dewar had frowned.

"It's pneumonia all right," said he. "Yep. That's right. I hadn't noticed. You ain't looking any too good."

John, his strange weariness thus acknowledged as evident to others, acknowledged it himself.

"I'll wait," he said, and at once sat down. He felt utterly jaded.

"All right, all right," said Dewar. "We'll just have a little inspection. Bunt knows about this sort of thing better than I do. We won't be long."

Over his shoulder John watched them disappear out of the daylight among the wooden props, and then, sitting down on a boulder, rested his chin on a hand and gazed at the view. Its grandeur seemed as of a picture, and not reality. Then it seemed as a view in a dream; and it was as if in dreamland that he heard the Wolfer say:

"All right, John. It's good enough. And here we are."

He tried to rise but sank down; he tried again. Dewar grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet.

"I'm all right," said Fiske.

This time, when Dewar looked at him frowning, the effect to John was of his face being very small, far off, then coming nearer and growing ridiculously large, distorted; then receding again. The Wolfer put up a hand and felt his forehead, and annoyance, like a child's petulance, filled him.

"Don't do that!" he snapped thinly. "Don't stare, and come and go!"

"All right, all right," soothed Dewar. Turning to Bunt he said: "We got to get him into

a bunk and between blankets. Come on, let us see that shack."

Suddenly John did not greatly care where he went. But when he found himself staggering between Bunt and the Wolfer toward a house with a nose and two eyes he made a whimpering sound that brought their glances to him again.

"What a queer shack!" he said. "It's like a face."

"That's the way shacks look," said the Wolfer, and then: "You haven't been in yet?"

Bunt's voice, as from a distance, although he was close by, replied: "Not yet." Then they were abruptly at the shack, and Bunt was saying: "Hope there's no rats in it. Guess he closed it up all right." The door was opened; and then John found himself sitting on a stool; and the Wolfer, standing beside him, was saying: "I'll get some fresh fir-feathers. A dandy shack—a dandy mattress . . . blankets . . . warm . . . got a prospector's stove . . . fine and dandy . . . all right soon . . ."

He wondered what was happening to him. The next he knew he was in a bed. It was surely a bed, because he was not on the ground but raised up off it and could look down at it. He looked round and saw a narrow room that stretched away for about a mile, and a mile

away a door opened and Walt the Wolfer entered, and crossed that mile in an incredibly short space of time, and said: "Here, drink this," and, stooping to give him a steaming pannikin, came absurdly close and was ridiculously large, gigantic, as he had been on the way back from Bush's prospect tunnel.

"I want," explained John, trying to sit up to take the pannikin, "to get up and go and see if Bunt is dead or alive."

"Why he's alive all right."

"But we must make sure. At the top of that dark forest . . . "

"Bunt!" called the Wolfer, and a voice answered as if from the other side of Eternity. Then Bunt was just there, and Walter was saying: "See, here he is. He's all right," and then in an aside: "He wanted to get up and see if you were dead or alive. Thought you were lying on the top of a dark forest!"

They were good nurses, though unlearned, inexperienced, in some of the little points of nursing. When he lay as if in troubled sleep they discussed, in whispers, what was best to do. They did not know that an ordinary low speaking voice was better. They did not know that the effect of their whispering was terrible to the delirious patient, that the sibilant sound

troubled John. Their whispering was as of plotters, murderers. He heard and wondered what diabolical schemes were discussed round him. He could stand it no more.

"What? What?" he shouted, or thought he shouted, but his voice was thin.

Immediately the whispering ceased.

"Where's Bunt?" he asked.

"Right here," said Bunt.

"All right, John. All right, old son," came soothingly a voice he recognized as the Wolfer's.

"There are people whispering," he told them.

For three days, then, he babbled, and they heard much of his inner life as well as much that wasn't of his inner life. At last he opened his eyes, to a rational shack, with a prospector's stove in it, in which logs crackled, and a feeling of weight of many blankets on him. He stretched and looked at the place. He felt with his hands, and under the blanket below him fumbled fir-boughs. Their scent was in the little room, and it was very good to smell. It was so good, and the sense of coming back to it so good that, in his weakness, tears filled his eyes. It was then that the door opened and he had only strength to rub his face against the blanket and to wipe away his tears.

There stood the Wolfer in the doorway, long and lean, his round spectacles framing worried eyes that suddenly were filled with happiness.

“Hul-lo!” said he.

“Hul-lo!” said Jack.

“Bunt!” shouted the Wolfer. “Bunt! Bunt, he’s better!”

At the friendliness in the tones in which the speech was uttered, John’s eyes again were moist. Bunt came in and leant against the wall and looked down at him, a rational Bunt, normal size, normal in every way. And when Walter came closer he did not swell up so that his face was as big as a pumpkin; and when he put his hand on Jack’s forehead, Jack felt no ridiculous irritation.

“I seem to have been sick,” said he.

“You’ve been sick all right,” said the Wolfer. “We’ve had a darned anxious time; but you’re all right now.”

And then, remembering what he was there for, what he had, as it were, “signed on” for—his position of mediator, keeper of the peace—he realized that, even sick, he had filled the position well. In looking after him there had been no asperities between these two partners of certain antipathetic qualities—individualists both.

“You were sure wandering worried in queer places, and re-living your life with kinks in it, by remarks you made,” said Bunt. “Pleased to meet you again, Mr. Fiske.”

His levity had returned with a rush, seeing the patient better.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A SHARE-HOLDER

VERY weak, still with an airy feeling in his body, but not now in fever, Jack was helped out of bed. The mountains no longer wavered away into distance and then loomed back again (as they had done, behind the looming and receding figures of the Wolfer and Bunt); the forests had not the appearance of rushing down the draws like rivers of trees. All was again natural; but he was absurdly weak.

“What you’ve got to guard against now,” said Dewar, very seriously, “is pneumonia.”

“What’s been wrong with me?”

“Well, you’ve had what is called a ‘temperature.’ In other words you’ve had a high temperature. Some people would call it mountain fever. I think your fever was only the result of strain, hardship, anxiety, and general hellery. You’re like me John. You’re for the life contemplative. You were born to be high-brow, instead of getting mixed up with six-guns! Life is hard. Circumstances are sometimes too

strong for us and we are forced into pulling a gun, so to speak. Talk about children of circumstance! It's been too much for you."

"I'm hardy enough," protested Jack. "I can stand the journey."

"Ah, the journey—yes!" said the Wolfer. "You can stand the camping, and the quiet, the ax-work and making trail; but you can't stand the other racket. You could follow old John Muir up and down the Sierras like a goat. But this emulation of a movie star! He only does it when the camera is busy and then he has a rest! You've been doing it for days without a camera! You've had a fierce time. Why, man, even in your delirium you kept seeing parties pursuing you everywhere. You wanted to know who was after Larry too. Well, set your mind at rest. Larry seems to have sneaked away without anybody trailing him up. All's well. Look on the other side. Sniff the odour of balsam. We've got fresh meat for you—bones to boil for good soup, instead of bacon and beans and flapjacks. We've got to get you strong. The good air will help. The great thing is not to worry."

"How's the prospect?"

Walter smiled.

"Good enough," he said. "Bunt says that the best mineralogist can't tell about ore till it

is assayed, that is exactly. But it looks like the same as old man Bush had on him, and you know that gave the highest assay in the history of this section. Say, that must have been an awful whale of a charge that Larry put in. He sent down a whole rock-slide."

"That's what Bunt and I heard, then, from the valley?"

"Yes. So Bunt thought. Well, it's high-grade all right."

"I'm glad. Your fortunes are made, then?"

"O I don't know. It may be some other people's fortunes. They'll say it is too far. They'll say transport will deplete profits. They will want to buy cheap. That's the world too. That's business!"

Bunt, at that, came strolling in.

"Ha-ha!" he said. "Settin' on a stool! Out of bed! And Walt's giving you his contorted views on the Battle of Life. Cut it out, Mr. Dewar. You got to accept the conditions of the game and fight it out on them lines."

"I'll fight it out on the lines the majority agrees on all summer," said Walt, "but I'll sure protest."

"Not to a sick man. Have you put up our proposition to him?"

The Wolfer shook his head.

"Not yet," said he.

"Well, it's like this," said Bunt. "Walt ain't a burrow-underground man. He's no miner. I've done it, but I hate it. If this was a placer proposition we'd all go in together, stake her, wash her, and get the colour. It's an ore proposition, so we'll sell it. We ain't got the capital to work it on the scale it needs, and we ain't got the inclination either. We've been talking it over. You've had a hard time. What do you say to having a third share if we sell her?"

"Why, I'm only in for the trip," said John. "A hundred dollars a month. And I've had fifty."

"O pshaw!" exclaimed Bunt. "You've kept the peace even when you was a sick man and unconscious of what you were doing. We ain't financiers. Why man, I've put the worth of a claim over the bar and across the card-table in one night when there were bars and card-tables in this state, all open and inviting, and no need to go and look for them. And if we sell for anything in reason you'll be able to wed that girl you've been talking to straight on by the hour these days in your fever."

"Girl!" said Fiske.

"He's only joshing," the Wolfer explained.

Jack sat and stared before him, felt very weak and very soft. Here were two men he

had looked upon as on the verge of what is called Tough. And here they were offering him a sum—that might be anything—in the lightest off-hand manner. He knew utterly upright people, highly respectable, who asked the price of the stamp to stick on a cheque paid to them for a thousand dollars, niggled over a nickel. Well, perhaps that was the way to success, he mused. He preferred Walt the Wolfer and Bunt. But he was too tired to think even of their offer, even of who the girl might be whose name he had spoken in his high temperature and illness, if he had spoken a girl's name.

“That’s too much,” said he.

“Shucks!” said Bunt.

“Pooh!” said the Wolfer.

John sat resting, with the easy mind of the convalescent. He looked neither backward on the terrors and blood-shed that had doubtless, according to Dewar’s view, been the real cause of his breakdown, nor forward with doubt on the journey home. For a moment it came into his head that though they had found the prospect they were not yet home, and then he recalled the adage about crossing bridges till one comes to them—and it being noon, and all the hill warm in the sun, he hobbled out to sit at the door and breathe deep of the good air.

"I'm mighty sorry I've gone and been sick on your hands," said he.

Bunt replied in his Buntian phraseology: "The life we've been leading only iron men and fence-posts can stand." He nodded his head. It was one of those sayings with a tail. "And sometimes the fence-posts give out," he added.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GOING HOME

THE grandeur and majesty of the mountains, these serene peaks, changing colour all day as the world rolled around, with their high glaciers and snow crevices; the great hearts of these forests filling the long gashes of the lower fanning valleys, each with its own roar of a creek in the bottoms: all that had its tremendous allure for these three men of such different natures.

In one part of him John Fiske was elated to know that he was here, seeing it all, hearing it all, breathing it. Yet as they strung down, leaving Bush's prospect, and Shank's lean-to tent, and Bush's shack with its narrow door and two slits of windows (all securely closed up again to keep out mountain rats) he was glad. Some other time he might return, he thought, in different conditions, and enjoy it all, in tranquillity.

Down through the deep forest that was the Dark Forest of his delirium, the laden cayuses stepped daintily, heads down, with little cautious dropping jerks. They came to the roar

of the creek and the temporary bridge, the great cedar tree, the rut in which he had helped to make. They continued beyond to the great rock-slide, and there paused a long spell to let the horses graze, packs off, as there was little feed further on. Then again, packs once more in place, heavier than on the way out (for now they carried much ore, not merely small samples, but enough to prove the find, every beast with its load, one way or another, of about a hundred and sixty pounds), they climbed well up the rocky edges of the slide before entering it.

The Wolfer swung to the saddle and led the way into the rubble. It was better to go mounted than afoot, for if they went afoot horse and man might be separated, and the horses thus get flustered. A little way out Walt's horse began to slide, but he headed him on. Behind, Bunt and John urged the pack-horses out into the difficult place, so that there might not be too long a gap between Walt's horse, leading, and the first pack-horse. If only the whole string could keep close at starting each horse would wildly try to follow in the steps of the one ahead and not allow the drift of the slide to carry it down. Later, half-way out in the slide, some showed signs of being carried away. Bunt urged his horse a little below

them, dropping side-wise a moment from the saddle to pick up a handful of small stones to throw at their haunches.

"Up! Up! Up!" his voice shouted, and the hills replied: "... Up! Up!" John drove the last horse ahead and followed. It was an exciting crossing, like the crossing of a kind of dry river, a river stationary until stepped into and then all movement. But they won safely over.

"That's that!" shouted the Wolfer hilariously, "That's that!" And then, raising his head he sang a snatch heard in the streets of Jaffery when the Salvation Army Band came in with the gamblers:

*"And nightly pitch my moving tent
A day's march nearer home!"*

And the hills sang back: "... nearer home."

They had to camp that night before reaching a good feeding ground. A small quantity of the diminishing oats was served out, and a fire built in the midst of the woods. The floor of the woods was simply all fir-cone dust, tamarack needles, feet deep; and it smouldered far from the fire, smouldered on even under their ground-sheets and they had to get the pick and shovel out and dig a trench round the fire. Even then the roots were found to be on fire

—smouldering—and had to be chopped away. In the morning, bucket after bucket of water was poured on the remains of the camp-fire before they could risk leaving it. They had taken no risks with the horses, but had tied each for the night along the trail ahead, so that it looked like some kind of open-air stable, or a cavalry picket-line. Again they were given each a handful of oats, loaded up, and once more all were under way. The horses in advance had the best of it then, snatching every chance blade of grass, but they were not allowed to stop to graze.

“When the going’s good—go! That’s my motto!” the Wolfer announced. “You never know what you may get up against any day that will hold you back.” And he talked to the horses as if they understood: “Take what you can grab in passing, but no stopping to graze. Grab on the move!” With no more trouble than having to alight and chop a tree fallen low across the trail since they had passed that way they came to the long open slope where Tom James and Nancy had made up on them to warn them of the coming of the Carl Scott gang. There they took a long rest while the horses ate, tear-tearing all along the hill. The rifles and guns taken from Scott’s gang still lay there.

"Won't folks wonder what these guns mean!" ejaculated Bunt nodding towards them. The Wolfer looked over at the pile.

"Leave 'em. Some man, with the makings of a writer of a tale of the kind called deringo in him, may come along here some day and look upon them and think out a stirring new serial, just pondering upon them. We'll leave 'em to puzzle future generations and maybe inspire that possible literatoorist coming this way."

"He won't think up anything like the true story," said Bunt. "I wonder what he might en-title his efforts anyhow?"

"Quest of the Good Enough," said the Wolfer, putting his hand to his hip and slowly pulling out a mighty flat tobacco-pouch.

Bunt watched him.

"Getting down near the last grains?" said he. "Didn't restock when you went back with that outfit of bad men?"

"N—o!"

Bunt drew forth his pouch, and offered it.

"O, I've enough," said Walt. "I'll make out to MacIntyre's store. There's plenty of tobacco there—stacks of it!"

But they were destined not to reach MacIntyre's on that trip, to be deflected from the trail they intended to travel.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DEFLECTED

IT befell thus: On the next afternoon they came to where MacIntyre Creek swept closer, in various channels percolating along, singing, dancing shallow among the shingly bottoms. Thus far all went well. They had even a sense of elation counting the miles, and counting the peaks, one by one. With the pack-horses strung out ahead of them they came across the meadow there, towards the last rise, and then, one by one, reined in, and grouped, and stared. For below them, looking in their direction, warned of their coming by the pack-laden animals that jogged ahead, stood a man in his shirt sleeves, leaning on a shovel beside the two heaps of stones under which lay Sid Stevens and the thin skeleton of a bad man called Ghost-face. He was a big man with a heavy moustache, and all three recognized the sheriff of Jaffery City.

“Gee whiz!” ejaculated Bunt. “Say Walt! Here’s where you put your bean in soak. He’s either digging ’em up or has dug ’em up and

is covering 'em over again! Here's where the thinking hard has to be done. Think, darn you!"

But Walt was already thinking, a hand fidgeting to and fro, feeling the underside of his chin; that hefty shirt-sleeved person Sheriff Bow was a wise man. He did not precipitate Trouble. He gave them one look, glanced over toward his pack-horse. On the horn hung his belt and holster. He let it hang there. He went on with his work. He turned round and shoving the shovel under some loose stones threw them on the heap by which he stood, then strolled over to his pack-horse and thrust the shovel under the rope.

"Come on," said Walt; and shaking the lines he rode on, down toward the big man in the shirt-sleeves. He thought the next calm move might be over to the saddle-horse and the armament.

"How-do, sheriff," said the Wolfer, reining in.

"How-do," said the sheriff drily.

"Been out to investigate?" asked the Wolfer. "Been out to verify the identity of the two corpses?"

The sheriff merely bit on his great walrus moustache but made no reply. The Wolfer dismounted.

"Let us pow-wow," said he, and sat down on a boulder.

The sheriff had stepped over and taken the lines of his saddle-horse in hand but dropped them, turned and sat down on another boulder beside Dewar.

"Well?" said he.

"Well," said Walter, "I've been up in the mountains but I can tell you all about this little business. It's this: You got a 'phone call from Eagle Bend from a crook called Carl Scott to the effect that if you came out here you'd find the bodies of Sid Stevens and his friend Ghost-Face, buried here. Now where Carl Scott got his information from was me. He didn't tell you that on the 'phone?"

Sheriff Bow said not a word, merely bit and bit on the ends of his walrus-moustache. But by his silence, Walt surmised that he had made a good guess as to how the sheriff knew to come and examine there.

"Well," said the Wolfer, going on with his talk, seeing that the sheriff was listening. "It wasn't straight of him not to tell you that. And I tell you why he didn't tell you. These two men were following us up. We were to be their meat. It was timed just a bit wrong. I don't want to sound like a moralizer, but the

crooks do generally side-slip just by an inch, and it's an inch that makes all the difference. My friend Fiske and I came out of the woods up there." He pointed down creek. "You can just see where the trail is. But Bunt was only over the first roll of this meadow south."

The sheriff glanced where directed but still said nothing, merely gnawed on at his thick drooping moustache. He did not even nod his head as evidence that he seriously listened.

"They held us up. Get that fixed, sheriff. They held us up, Fiske and me. Now, sheriff, you know I'm not a good man to hold up. I'm too quick. I can pull second and fire first. That's what happened. They stuck us up here and I plugged—"

"He only plugged one," said Bunt. "I came pirouetting back and got the other. It was sure like a dream to me, but drunk or sober . . . " he left the rest in air.

The sheriff merely twirled his moustache ends and glared up at Bunt under bushy brows and his broad-shadowing hat-brim.

"We buried these two gentlemen and rode on," said Walt. "And then the main party of Carl Scott's outfit made up on us away up

through the hills another day's ride nearly, and—" he paused.

The sheriff looked at him heavily.

"I don't know if I got to say to you," he remarked, "that everything you shoot off now will be taken as evidence, for I ain't got a warrant for your arrest—not yet!"

"Well," said the Wolfer, "I don't hunger to go on the back trail again but you can find evidence there piled in the shape of a little monument of lethal weapons they surrendered to us. If you want to verify that you could go on alone and see it alone. Easy to find. Straight on one block of forest, so to speak, and in the next big grassy stretch you'll see it."

"I can't force you to go with me," said the sheriff. "I've no warrant to detain you. Guess I'll take your word for it anyhow. You got the drop on them, and them after you?"

"We sure did," said Walter, "or at least Bunt did. He's the biggest marvel with a six-gun in all the West outside Movie Town, Cal."

But to that persiflage the sheriff paid no heed. He did not even smile. He was thinking.

"How do you know Carl Scott gave the information?" the sheriff enquired.

"Because I know Carl Scott," replied the Wolfer.

Sheriff Bow laughed.

"Look here," he said, "I'll tell you. I believe your story. The man that rang me on the 'phone wouldn't give his name. I asked him who he was, and what he was doing himself up in these parts, and then he just rang off. That voice kept worrying me. I'd heard it before. When you said 'Carl Scott' just now I knew it was Carl Scott's voice all right. Still, we had to see if these facts he gave me on the 'phone were correct. These two defunct gentlemen over there are men with a darn poor record. I believe your story. I have no warrant to arrest you. But I advise you to come along back with me in the circumstances, and make a full statement. It's an unusual case, but the usage, if any man goes into the mountains and sees, or is brought in touch with, any death by misadventure," his voice had the sound as of one quoting a word or two "is for him to make a statement on his return. If the law thinks it's essential for him to remain in custody, pending the need for further enquiry, all right. If it don't, all right. But I think you better come along with me to Jaffery."

Then, drawing on his coat (as he did so they noticed the twinkle of his badge pinned under

it) the sheriff stepped to his horse and drew the trailing lines over its head.

“All right,” said he, and swung to the saddle.

And that was why they did not replenish their tobacco-supply at MacIntyre’s Bluff.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE WOLFER AS A DEPUTY SHERIFF

BUT hardly had the sheriff and the Wolfer mounted than, out of the woods, on the trail from MacIntyre's Bluff, that the sheriff preferred they should not take, came riding a horseman.

It was the man MacClintock whom Walt had hit on the head in revenge for the weal on Jack's brow.

"Ha!" sighed Dewar.

"What?" asked the sheriff, and then he saw the man.

MacClintock did not see them at first, perhaps because they were not moving to attract his eye. He rode out of the woods and behind him came another rider, and then another.

Still motionless the four men in the midst of the shingle watched. Another rider appeared, and a fifth followed.

"This is the bunch all right," said Walter.

"The bunch you scared off?" asked the sheriff.

"Yep."

"Come back to try again."

There they were, two men besides MacClintock having been in Scott's outfit. Two others were fresh.

"It is a tough-looking outfit, and ready for action," remarked Bow, and he opened his coat, exposing the badge of office pinned inside. This movement attracted the eyes of that string of riders and the moment he saw them look he shouted:

"Halt right there!"

To those beside him he said quietly: "Now this may be where I ask you to get in with me. These fellows have no use for me anyhow. I know the man in the lead. You'd see if he got closer, why he has the name he has—Cock-eye MacClintock."

"We have met," murmured the Wolfer. "I introduced myself to him by aid of the butt of a six-gun."

"Well, he's tough, and he works this district for Scott, but I can't just get full evidence. He's a hootch runner, tanglefoot peddler."

MacClintock spoke, reining in.

"We want that man there, Sheriff," he said. "The long lean son of a gun with the four eyes."

"That's done it," murmured the Wolfer to

his companions. "‘When you call me that, smile,’ so to speak, or to quote from Owen Wister’s high-saddle classic. No man can call me Four-Eyes unless he smiles,” and he struck a mock heroic attitude. It was his way, in tight corners, to talk flippantly, part of the odd “make-up” of the man.

Another man behind edged his horse forward past Cock-eye. “Now see here, Sheriff,” he said, “all this business is outside the law. It’s a little private matter between us and these gents.”

“Nothing is outside the law,” Sheriff Bow rasped.

“O but it is. We are. The law ain’t no use to us, not in your state. You’re too darn much like an old woman—can’t see how to make good when you get a chance, and you with a wife and family.”

Dewar laughed. He realized that these hootch-runners had tried bribery and corruption upon Sheriff Bow and had been turned down.

“We want that man,” said Cock-eye, “and we’re going to have him! We ain’t going to allow any outsider from over the mountains to come in here and butt into our plays and put one over on us.”

“That’s all right,” soothed the sheriff.

"There's the law courts. Take your troubles there."

"Where's your king-bolt? Where's your Carl Scott?" asked the Wolfer.

"Do you think you scared him by your talk about being able to buffalo his outfit?" the man replied. "Why he's only gone out beyond Eagle Bend on his own more urgent business. We've come back. We're able to run this little game."

Their horses being restive, their formation had fanned slightly during these moments; and the sheriff spoke quickly to Dewar.

"Say," he said, "I recognize two more of them men and I've got warrants on me for their arrest too. They're wanted. I'll require your assistance."

"I am a Deputy Sheriff?" enquired the Wolfer, talking to Bow but with his gaze on the new-comers.

"You can put it so," said the sheriff. "I want you all to stand by me."

"What a pleasure it will be to my people to hear of this," sighed the Wolfer. "They always wanted me to take an active part in things."

"This is final, Sheriff. Give us that man or the shooting begins," said MacClintock.

"Shoot nothing!" ejaculated Sheriff Bow in

a tone of contempt. "And I want you, Cyrus Strong, and you Edgar Salt on a charge of—"

He got no further, for at these words the man Cyrus Strong flicked his hand to his belt and whipped upward his revolver. There was a crashing report, but not from him.

It was Bunt who fired. He had given another exhibition in the adroit use of the six-gun. Cyrus Strong's arm was shattered. The six-gun fell from his hand.

"Whoopee!" shouted Bunt. "I can bring it up as well as slam down. Both ways! Up or down! Pointing and sighting too! Now you gents, did you see how I did that? No time for out and up and down—just out and up. I can sure slam up a gun!" His voice was like that of a schoolboy delighted over a win at marbles.

It was a tense moment while the horses fidgetted and snorted and were restrained, and these two groups of men eyed each other.

"It's up to you, Sheriff," murmured the Wolfer.

"It sure is," Sheriff Bow, agreed. "Say Mr. Bunt, or whatever your name is, back my play. I guess you're the always on hand gent, the sportive sport of the foot-hills so to speak, and the white-haired boy where the gun yelps.

Back my play. You have your gun in your fist, and you are the only man who has. I'll advance on them to one side so as not to get in the range of possible fire."

"Go to it, Sheriff," said Bunt. "And by the way, let me tell you that my partner, Walter, can draw and fire one kilowatt-metre ahead of me. You're on to a snap though maybe it don't look like it to you. Him and me is a circus all on our lonesome."

"All right," murmured the sheriff. "But I'll just tell you that the other fellow, Salt, is some gun-man too."

"Good heavens, we're not gun-men!" the Wolfer objected.

"Pardon me," said the sheriff, but did not look round. Dismounted, he walked to where the gang stood close to the wood and put a hand to Strong's bridle.

"I'm just going to lead you to the side here," said he. "I want you."

The man glared, but could do nothing with a smashed arm. The sheriff led his horse aside.

"Get off," he said.

Strong looked over sourly at Bunt and then dismounted. The sheriff walked back to the gang and stretched up to catch Salt's horse by the bridle.

"Don't you do it, Sheriff. I tell you I'll shoot if you touch my horse."

The Sheriff looked him right in the eye and putting up a hand caught the bridle. For Walt and Bunt, even more for Jack, the tensity was oppressive. Jack was not in the "play." He had no skill in what is called "the draw."

Suddenly the Wolfer spoke. The action that preceded, or accompanied his speech, was quick as conjuring. His right arm, with the bandage new earth-soiled on its wrist, was up, crooked. His left held a revolver, and that hand was almost against the right forearm.

"Better let the sheriff have his way," said he. "I have you plumb at the end of my sights. I don't often use them, but there is a time for everything and everything in its time."

Bunt had to make a comment on that. "As the snake remarked when it swallowed the tarantula," said he.

Salt glanced at the Wolfer and at Bunt—and surrendered. He allowed his horse to be led aside by Sheriff Bow. He dismounted. He permitted the Sheriff to annex his gun. Then the master of these ceremonies turned to the others. Said he:

"You're a great bunch! All carrying six-guns—short-arm guns—contrary to law."

"So are those two fellows over there," growled MacClintock.

Sheriff Bow laughed.

"And a good job too!" he ejaculated.

The remark delighted the Wolfer.

"As an officer of the law," he explained, "the sheriff has the right to exercise discretionary powers."

"I sure have," said the sheriff. "Keep 'em covered, Mr. Bunt, and you, Walt Dewar, get your rifle on these two fellows I've put on the side track."

He walked calmly now over to the remaining three men and slowly, but with a very definite air, appropriated from each his revolver. One had also a rifle under his leg in a saddle sling. The sheriff drew that out also.

"Now gents," said he, "count yourselves lucky. I have, as that gentleman says, the right to exercise discretionary powers. And my discretion is that you fellows git—and *pronto*—the way you came. I've no charge agin you today. I don't want to have all the bad actors in the west on my hands at once. But I tell you this—don't you try to go up and jump the claim these men have staked. I know a whole lot about this business one way and another. You turn around and beat it. Now, git!"

The three turned their horses round. The

sheriff smacked the haunches of their pack-horses and started them back on the trail by which they had come. After they had ridden some way into the timber their voices came shouting curses backward. The sheriff glared into the dark woods.

"That don't cut any ice!" he snarled.

The Wolfer laughed, looking at the confiscated weapons lying on the ground.

"This romance," he murmured, "might be called The Six-Gun Trail."

"What's that?" enquired Sheriff Bow.

"Going to leave that little pyramid of shooters stacked here in the trail?" The Wolfer enquired. "We left one a block along through the woods as I told you."

"Seems a pity to discard them," said the sheriff. "Guess we'll take them with us."

With puckering lips, meditative, he took one by one, ejecting the shells; and having put these in his pocket stowed the revolvers away in his pack. The rifle he thrust under the hitching-rope of the saddle-horse, and then:

"All set?" he enquired.

He looked at Edgar Salt and Cyrus Strong, the two "wanted men" (though wanted for what not Walt, nor Bunt, nor Jack knew) and with a grim nod said he:

"All right, my friends, mount!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE WOLFER IS NOT INTIMIDATED

“DO I understand,” enquired the Wolfer as, all gathered together, pack-train and saddle-horses, and all strung out across the series of shallow fords over to the trail down which Bunt had come so recently, stalked by Sid Stevens and Ghost-face, “do I understand, sheriff, that I am still acting in the rôle of a deputy?”

“You ain’t acting any,” replied the sheriff.

“You are living it to the life.”

“Some men,” said Walter, “have greatness thrust upon them.”

“Spokeshave!” observed the incorrigible Bunt, riding gaily behind, hand held high, wrist crooked, in the grandest manner of a horseman.

The two prisoners scowled. Bunt’s hilarity seemed to them, one would imagine from their expressions, as a personal taunt. They could not be hilarious! Why was he?

They crossed the creek and came to the timber, and there below them were a matter of

a dozen shacks in the slow process of disintegration among stumps and a patch of fireweed.

“What’s this?” asked Jack.

“Symbols of the transience of man,” said the Wolfer. “There used to be a great fuss on these shingle bars, placer-mining. The period was somewhere just after the California rush and before the Cariboo excitement. I knew they were here somewhere. Interesting to be coming out this way so as to see them. Yes, evidence of the folly of getting excited over anything. A roaring camp here once; and now, if you leant on one of these shacks it might fall. Ant-riddled. These old shacks tell the same old story as the ruins of Babylon although they are not so old! No, John, nothing is worth getting excited about. At any moment we may think things are worth getting excited over, but they are not. This is the ideal life for me—not exactly a prisoner, not exactly (if I am any judge) a deputy sheriff—sitting back in the high saddle looking at the sunlight through the trees, and meditating on the ruins. Nothing is worth getting excited about!”

But he was to belie his speech, and that very soon. They came to the crest of the easterly hog-back above MacIntyre Creek and there Mount Jaffery loomed above them. Walter

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gazed up at its sides and saw that the great cone was newly powdered with snow. And when they came to the Seven-Up mine wagon road he shouted loudly:

“Sheriff! Sheriff!”

The sheriff, in the lead, held up a hand for the string to stop.

“What is it?” he hailed, turning in the saddle.

The Wolfer sidled his horse past the string.

“It’s just this, sheriff,” he explained. “I have a bunch of extra horses left up in the high meadow under Mount Jaffery, and it occurs to me that I’d better go and head them down.”

“They’ll have to wait there till you get to Jaffrey. You can come for them again.”

“I am a prisoner? Eh?”

“Well, I don’t put it that way. Only I’d advise you to keep riding along.”

“Can’t be done, sheriff. Horses are horses.”

The sheriff bit on his big moustache.

“Horses can wait,” said he.

The Wolfer shook his head.

“They have been up there too long. They will be as thin as rakes. There’s not enough feed on that high meadow.”

“Well, if they are cayuses they can rustle.”

“They can’t!” said the Wolfer. “I don’t

know if you've ever been up there?" he added in tones of enquiry.

"I have," answered Sheriff Bow, definitely.

"Then you know what that meadow is like."

"I do. They can get out of it and go rustling. What's your game anyhow?"

"Game nothing! And they can't get out. You may remember the steep narrow place at the near end?"

The sheriff nodded.

"Well, I put bars right across there to keep them from straying on that way."

"Then they can go over the divide. You've used them for packing over there, and when they eat that grass they'll just naturally keep on."

"But they can't. The gap at the far end of that meadow is mighty narrow, maybe narrower than it was when you saw it last. There has been a tremendous windfall turning pretty near all of the far gap into a mesh of natural fences, high too. And I made it all as safe as corral-bars, with logs, where it looked as if these horses of mine might get through. No, there's no game about it. My partner, who took them up last, didn't expect we would have to keep them waiting all this time, and he left it like that."

"They'll have to wait," said the sheriff.

The Wolfer's head suddenly thrust forward and the expression on his face was virulent.

"Sheriff," he said, "I'm going. Darn it, doesn't a horse rely on a man? Do you think I am going back on them?"

"Man, you're crazy!" said the sheriff.

"Sure. I'm crazy. Of course I am. I put no faith in men such as I put in a dog or a horse. I'm a crank. I'm crazy. A man in his senses wouldn't worry about a horse! Of course not! He'd only think himself bound to do his duty to his fellows—and he wouldn't do that! He'd only talk about doing it. Well, I'll see you later."

The sheriff clapped his hand to his gun and raised it.

"Come back!" he said.

"I'll come back down the road after you, with my horses," the Wolfer replied, heedless of the revolver levelled at him.

"Come back right now!" the sheriff rasped.

The Wolfer looked over his shoulder. The wild expression passed. His face fell grave, sombre, sad; and then came that twinkle of a smile that seemed to be in the very lenses of his glasses. He flicked his heels lightly to his horse's flanks and rode on, still looking over his shoulder, still smiling so.

Sheriff Bow watched him go, then turned to his two prisoners.

“And now, you fellows,” said he, “don’t you think I am weak because of that. Don’t you imagine you can work any get-away. I’ve no call to keep him; I ain’t got any warrant for his arrest like I got for you. If you try any get-away I’d shoot either of you down as sure as sure. And besides, that Wolfer is a man in a thousand.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

METROPOLITAN

THE "man in a thousand" kept his word. As they sat in their camp that night, the bulk of Mount Jaffery black in the blue over them, they heard a sound of singing. It was not loud and riotous. It came in snatches as the wind carried it. Salt looked at Strong; they exchanged a glance of hope. Any one coming might—there was always the possibility—be a friend. Or there might be a chance to leap upon their captors. Thin chance! And they knew it. But that was always the hope. There came the hollow driving sound, heard a moment and then lost, then again, of a horse's hoofs. The sheriff, sitting on a log back from the fire, loosened his gun in the sheath fastened to his belt, rose and stepping to the fire took a burning twig and lit a cigar. The singing voice broke out again, and closer.

"It's only Walt," said Bunt.

"Only!" exclaimed the sheriff, with a snort.

Into the little pocket where they camped came loping a string of lean horses, saw the

other horses there, halted, stared, and immediately began to graze. Behind them rode Walt the Wolfer. He swung to his feet and without a word unsaddled. Then he walked to the fire and sat down.

"Anything to eat?" he enquired. "I clean forgot I'd need grub myself—you argued so hard, sheriff. Got me mad! And when a man's in a temper he's no good at remembering details."

The sheriff nodded to the frying-pan where were still some slices of bacon.

"Yes sir," said the Wolfer, and in the tone that indicated a quotation he added: "'It is good for a man to have a temper in him, but not for him to be in a temper.'"

"Spokesh—" began Bunt.

For some reason the Wolfer had a tremendous dislike of that "Spokeshave!" being fired off at him. It was a trifle, but it made him furious, much more so than might a seemingly greater cause of annoyance. Before Bunt could get the "shave" out Walt whirled on him, eyes blazing.

"Shut up!" he roared.

Bunt merely looked at him thoughtfully, then leant out and passed over to him the big billy-can of tea, still half full, and a tin cup. The Wolfer took them without a word. As he ate

all eyes were on him. And glumly he ate, no twinkle in his eyes; but that smouldering fire behind his glasses. It seemed as if a little flame burned there.

"Hell!" he ejaculated. "And I was so happy up there in the woods! I come back to this 'Spokeshave' and it is all evaporated!"

He finished eating, and putting a hand to his hip pocket leisurely drew forth pouch and pipe. He opened the pouch. It was empty. As he looked ruefully at it something fell with a dull clap on his leg, he sitting there like a tailor. The sheriff had tossed him his tobacco-sack. The Wolfer looked up, glanced at him, inclined his head in a slow nod. He filled his pipe, then with a leisurely gesture took a twig from the fire and lit up, canted his head back and blew a great feather of smoke. He rose then, and stretching to the sheriff returned to him his tobacco-sack.

"Thank you, sheriff," he said. "For this relief much thanks."

As he seated himself again he looked over toward Bunt.

"You can say Spokeshave now if you like, Bunt," he said.

But Bunt did not. He merely grinned at his queer partner.

The Wolfer relaxed, content again.

"Great country this western country," said he. "And its place names, they are great too. They'll be in ballads yet. We're young. We're only beginning. This road—this Seven-Up road. There's a name for you. Know how it came by it, John?"

John shook his head.

"It's a souvenir of the old days. A prospector was sitting in the old tent hotel in Jaffery thirty years ago, showing his ore, and telling about his development work, and showing the assay card. There were two financiers from back east, and both happened to speak at once, and both said the same thing: 'I'll give you fifty thousand dollars for her.' So the prospector said: 'Done!' thinking they were in partnership. They weren't, so whose was it? The bar-keep said: 'You'd better shake the dice for it, or play a hand of seven-up.' So they played a hand of seven-up, and the winner paid down the fifty thousand dollars to the prospector and the loser stood drinks to all. Those were the days. That's how they did things then. I'm not old but I can remember them. But I was mostly on the prairies. I saw Big Prairie before there was a single grain elevator there, or a yard of barbed-wire. When the irrigation ditches began then we cattle and horse-

men came to know how the Indian must have felt when we arrived. . . .”

But that is not our story, although it began a talk that went on for hours by the fire, till even Salt and Strong were in it, their gloom cast aside. A great log was dragged to the fire, a canvas sheet was erected for a lean-to and acted like a reflector in which they reclined talking of the days before the automobile.

They talked of “Bad Man” Plummer and of Wild Bill Hickok, of old Chief Joseph and of General Miles, of the days when the river steamer chugged up from St. Louis to Fort Benton, and when from its deck the buffalo could be seen on the butte edges of the Missouri, silhouetted, till the siren screeched and they galloped away. The Wolfer stretched out content, puffing slowly on his pipe; the sheriff smoked his last cigar. Then sleep made their eyelids droop, and they slumbered, all but the sheriff who sat up to guard the two prisoners till about midnight, when he woke Bunt to that task. At two o’clock Bunt woke the Wolfer. Jack Fiske was considered, however safe in intention, not hard-bitten enough for the task of watching Salt and Strong. At four in the morning, when the dawn was putting out the stars, the billy was hung over the flame and the flour mixed for the flapjacks.

Bunt, in the word of the Wolfer, was a "flapjackologist." He could flip them and brown them just right, and they were light, if not as the proverbial feather—light. It was over the flapjacks that Cyrus Strong showed that, though he had lost his glumness on the night before, he was affected by that crabbed feeling that affects many early in the day.

"Can't you brown 'em better?" he asked, nay, snarled.

Bunt looked at him with what may best be described as a gentle rage, which he subdued.

"Sure!" he said, and showed how he could brown one.

"O shoot!" exclaimed Strong. "Can't you put a touch of black on 'em? They are only pale brown. And your partner said you were a flapjackologist!"

Bunt set down the pan and turned.

"I can make 'em as black as the Earl of Hell's riding leggings," he said very quietly.

There was that in his voice, so quiet and definite, that made Strong say no more.

"And that's blacker than the ace of spades," Bunt added, out of his knowledge of cant phrases.

Strong looked relieved when the flapjack was tossed out of the pan as if Bunt, with that flip, dismissed the matter also. Had the sheriff not

been present there would have been trouble.

"No use getting hot at a man that you ain't at liberty to beat up," growled Salt.

"You beginning too?" asked Bunt. "No great grit in getting fresh at a man when you know he can't show you whether he can beat you up or not. Sheriff Bow is running this outfit or I'd blacken the flapjack till it was charcoal and make you both eat it! There's a kind of man makes me tired, and that's the man who calls himself independent, but is only independent when it's safe—otherwise not independent at all."

The Wolfer chuckled and turned to Fiske.

"That's the Bunt I like," he said. "Now you know why we are partners. I like some of his views and opinions."

Then the sheriff, who had finished his breakfast, rose and strolled to and fro like a skipper on his quarter deck. That sheriff could certainly suggest his frame of mind by his deportment. He was becoming bored by Salt and Strong. He thought it was time again, in the old phrase, to hit the trail.

The prisoners he never asked to aid in the work of packing. They might have refused. They were not yet tried. He avoided a scene that they might have precipitated by refusing to help at such a task. But the "freshness"

over Bunt's flapjack he could not fail to note. Strong and Salt looked at him, and understood his grimness. When the packing was over, and the horses ready, said the sheriff:

"It is a wonder you fellows wouldn't think to saddle and unsaddle your own horses."

"You got to make us!" said Strong.

"No, sir!" replied the sheriff. "I have not. That's just the point. But I tell you now how it is this morning: I ain't going to make you ride 'em. You're going to walk, to shake down your flapjacks—brown or black!"

Salt looked at him, on the verge, to judge by his appearance, of refusing; but walk he did, and his horse trudged along with the pack-string. They had both had enough of walking by the time a halt was made for lunch and, that brief meal over without any culinary objections from them—

"I guess you two can ride," said the sheriff.

The feel of autumn was in the air. A warning rustle was in the birch-trees, a sear and crackling rustle. On more exposed slopes the jets of the yellow of changing cottonwoods stood up against the dark reddy green of the firs. Where no wind ruffled them they were like stencillings of yellow discs on an ochre background. The creeks ran down through the draws, thin in the late season, the Indian sum-

mer, with hurry and foam. They were a little fuller now because of the snows beginning on the heights, and melting with each day's sun, winter not strong enough even up there to hold the snow.

"You stand the travel fine," said the Wolfer to John, riding alongside of him.

"I'm as fit as a fiddle again."

"I really think your illness was chiefly mental," said the Wolfer. "All the biff of six-guns and rasp of .303's in these big places got on your nerves. And the tensity of that time when we felt for grips with Carl Scott's outfit and I blethered to them while Bunt crawled nearer; and Bunt jagged—a hideous spectacle—and Larry Shanks with his crazy grey eye or so: all that affected you; and the way he bent and bowed and fell down dead—that must have just about finished you. Look at them! Look at them! Look at the quiet and ancient old hills! God, how I love them! Look at that cottonwood—a yellow spurt against that wall of red firs. Look at that balsam! Say, it looks as if it had a grey-blue bloom on it like a peach—just a drift of grey-blue over it. Why doesn't that interest people more? The bloom bought in the corner drug store on my lady's cheek is of more attraction to most."

Bunt, ahead, turned in the saddle.

"Ain't this a swell bit of woods?" he called back to them. "For the love of Mike look at the way there's a kind of God-knows-what on that there balsam. It's green, I guess, but it looks as if it was peppered over with a kind of grey-blue."

The Wolfer nodded his head.

"You're taking it in too?" asked Bunt. "Not just a-ridin along at your moralizings?"

The Wolfer shook his head.

"Taking it all in," he chanted.

Then again with square back swaying in the saddle, Bunt paid no more heed to them.

"Now you see how Bunt and I can go into the hills together," Dewar remarked. "He has that side as well as the slam-down-a-gun side and, what is worse, the Spokeshave side! We both see the visible world. The visible world! But he takes it all as it comes, and I—some way or another—always find it linked up with thinking and thinking what it is all for. Life, I mean, us, the sheriff, these two toughs, and Bunt—who can sure slam down a gun. Alack and alas, as soon as I get hold of the quiet moments, I am booted by Destiny into some wild whirl!"

They were then aware of the riders ahead having taken a distinct downward grade. They

sank rapidly. Horses, riders' shoulders, riders' heads went dropping down against the glow of the late day on the road ahead, the avenue through the big woods. Next moment John and the Wolfer topped that rise and just as they leant back in their saddles to ease the horses for the descent there flashed up abruptly a series of lines and cross lines of light far below them in the half-lit valley.

"What's that?" asked John.

"That's Jaffery City. Fellow in the powerhouse touched a button."

"It looks as if we could just jump out and drop on it."

"If you could jump far enough! It is maybe four miles by an air-line, but it is a good ten by road from here."

On they rode, dropping down hill into dark woods, through which they had glimpses of the lights of Jaffery as if caught in the branches. Then they lost these lights altogether, taking a long grade; saw them again as they reached a wide curve of the road, had them slowly eclipsed again by a cape of hill thrusting out ahead. They dropped down from the region of big cedars and heard rustlings of leaves of cottonwood and birch, running in the bush on either side, of frightened mice or hedgehog, and then came out of the last woods to a region

of flat darkness where cowbells jangled from unseen fields.

"We're pretty close," said the Wolfer. "That's a side-walk, isn't it?" and he peered into the darkness.

"I believe it is!" said John seeing a faint grey gleam to one side.

An upright parallelogram of light suddenly showed, lighting up a strip of plank side-walk. It was from a door opened in a house they had not seen. The light went out. Feet sounded on wood.

"We're in suburbia," said the Wolfer.

Ahead was the muffled plod-plod of the other horses. They saw another spangle of light, streetlights, heard the rub-a-dub of feet on side-walks, saw figures move on verandas, doors open on balconies, and glimpsed, passing, a lamp, a table, a gleam of radiance on a wall beyond, in a picture glass or a mirror. Ripples of music came out to them. They heard from house after house the strains of "Me-Mo-My Mexico." From one came the blent sounds of some one practising on the saxophone and a dog sobbing about it.

They shook the lines and closed in on those ahead, to find the sheriff between his two prisoners with his pack-horse astern, a rope swinging from it to his saddle-horn.

"Your horses have hit a gait for the stable where you've been keeping them in town," said the sheriff. He turned to Fiske. "You," he said, "had better go along with Bunt to help him in case there is trouble in the traffic crossing Dewdney Street to the livery barn. And you, sir," he turned again to the Wolfer, "I guess you can come along with me as far as the jail."

"As deputy or prisoner?" asked the Wolfer in a light voice.

"O just to be around and help me if I need. I got these two gents and a pack-horse to negotiate. You come to the jail with me—but I won't ask you to come in tonight, if you'll excuse me."

There had been little levity on his part all the way, and even as he said that only the faintest smile showed on his face. It would not have been visible to them had they not then come to the region of the high arc-lamps.

The little city of Jaffery, after the silent places, looked like a mighty metropolis.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

QUEER FELLOW!

JOHN FISKE raised his bridle hand and extended his elbows and his cayuse shot after Bunt; but he reined in before coming level so as not to stampede the string. They loped along fast enough. The big barn door was open and the ponies clustered part in, part out, with a stableman, who had recognized some of those in the lead, not waiting for the arrival of their owners, but beginning to unpack.

"Hullo," said he, as Bunt rode up. "Packing ore now, I see, as a change from packing grub to surveyors. Back again!"

"Back again," echoed Bunt.

"Whose development results is this, might I ask?" said the stableman, holding up a fragment of rock that had fallen from one of the packs.

"Mine," answered Bunt.

"Oh! So you've taken to prospecting once

more instead of going back to your chasing of steers?"

"Yep."

"Some ore this, I guess."

"I guess."

"I've done a little bit in my time. This looks good enough to me."

Bunt blinked rapidly. He turned and winked to Fiske.

"Guess that's what it is," he said, unsad-
dling. "Where will I put my horses?"

"Anywhere. Anywhere."

It was then that the Wolfer arrived. He rode into the stable humming, and cheerily hailed:

"Hullo, folks! That's all right. Back again. Saw our friends safely home."

At the sound of his voice a horse that had been standing in a stall, heedless of the new arrivals, whinnied. The Wolfer stared at it, walked over to it, and as he came in upon the near side and rubbed its nose, it turned its neck and thrust its forehead against his chest.

"I see Tom James is here," said he.

"His daughter rode that hoss," replied the stableman. "Yes, he's in town too. He rode the grey next to the end one."

"So," said the Wolfer.

"You know that hoss?"

"Yes. Broke him when I was on the prairie. One of the brainiest horses I ever spraddled."

"He remembers you."

"Sure."

Unpacking over, the Wolfer enquired: "By the way, where does Mr. James put up when he's in town?"

"Tremont, I guess."

Outside John suggested: "If you want to see"—he paused—"Mr. James I could go over to the Rossland."

"Don't you want to see"—and the Wolfer paused also—"Mr. James yourself?"

John thought there was a twinkle in his eyes, but could not be certain. It might only be reflection of a street-lamp opposite the door.

"Yes," said he, "but I'd like to see Prop Donovan and Ma. They were surely good to me."

"Why of course—and a darn good sign of you. You're not infatuated anyhow."

It was a cryptic remark. Infatuated? Infatuated about Prop Donovan and Ma? What did he mean? They walked in silence several paces; but as they drew near the Tremont they saw James on the gallery, so John stopped, instead of posting on to the Rossland. Big beard on chest, big soft hat on head, legs

stretched out before him at ease, James sat holding in his fist a pipe that was out, gazing before him.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed recognizing them, and rose. "Come in. Come in. The nights are just beginning to be a bit chill for sitting around."

John did not say he would rather go on to the Rossland at once but passed inside with James, the Wolfer, and Bunt. Before the big fire of logs in the rotunda, already lit in the evenings, they sat down, James between them.

"Well," said he, "how's all gone? How did you come back?"

"Up the trail to the Seven-Up road from the old placer-workings."

"Ah! Then you did not meet a bunch of hoboes on horseback, among them three of that other bunch that you had the dust-up with?"

"O yes. We met them near the place where the placer-workings used to be."

"You did! And—"

"We had Sheriff Bow with us. We protected him and he protected us. We protected him with our six-guns, and he protected us by the might of his star."

"Fine! I thought I'd better 'phone him when those fellows went up MacIntyre's Creek."

"You 'phoned him! Well, he's deep. He didn't say a word about that."

"He couldn't. He didn't know. I was told he was out of town. I rang again later and asked for him. Still out of town. Would he be long? Nobody knew. Would I leave a message? No, it was private. Say, we had a worrying time then. That's what we're in town for—partly. I didn't want to 'phone too much. Thought I'd come in and see my friend Chief Loney and put him wise."

"You're surely a friend, Tom!"

"Thank Nancy!" said James. "I said you could take care of yourselves, but she wouldn't rest till we came in to discuss things with the Chief. He was going to send out a party tomorrow to see what those fellows were after up there. I didn't tell him you were there too. Not a word. I just reported a bunch of armed men going up MacIntyre Creek, and not as if they were out for an autumn deer-hunt."

"Well, he'll know all about it now, seeing that Bow has brought in two of them. They are in the coop, warm and comfy now."

"And you're back safe!"

"Yap."

Then John did a queer thing. He knew Nancy was in town, for the stableman had told him, and also, just a minute ago, Tom James

had spoken as though his daughter accompanied him. But said John:

"I hope Miss James will be all right at MacIntyre's Bluff with these other men going back that way."

"She's here, in town with me," said James. "She'd be all right anyhow. Old-timer MacIntyre can look after the entire city, and his son Charlie is no slouch."

"City!" said the Wolfer seriously. "It may be a city yet, and town-lots booming up. We've re-staked Bush's claim, and rumour has doubtless told you of what she assays. I've been thinking of the gradients as I rode back. That trail could be turned into a wagon-road easily, and save all the climb up to Mount Jaffery. MacIntyre's Bluff would be the place for shipping."

"Well, the railway surely is going ahead quick from Eagle Bend. But how about an aërial tram in your dream of the possibilities?"

"It's a long way. It couldn't be worked with the one line all the way. There would have to be changes of level to get the gravity power."

"It's got to be high-grade ore if it is far back."

"Now don't you start telling me that!" exclaimed the Wolfer. "That's what Bunt says

the blame speculators and company promoters will say first crack out of the box; and that they will follow it up with a whole string of reasons why it is only worth buying for a song."

"Placer is the thing for an open-air man," said James. "Hullo—how do you do?"

This was to Judge Davenport, passing out from the dining-room. The Judge stopped.

"Judge," said James, "I want you to meet Walt Dewar, Bunt Bradley, and John Fiske."

"We've already met," said the judge, shaking hands with the Wolfer, "and met you too, sir," to John. Then he bowed to Bunt.

"And you called me a tough," said the Wolfer.

"No, no. O no. Not a tough. Just tough! Quite different, Mr. Dewar. There was a tough on that stage too, however," and he turned to James. "That fellow Carl Scott, you know—bootlegger of bootleggers. We'll have him euchred some day. He has a regular combine through this country. I recognized him though he thought I didn't."

"Well," said the Wolfer, "I expect you'll soon be seeing me again in a more formal way."

"What do you mean?"

"O it's too long a story," said Dewar.

John leaned forward.

"I really must go and let the Donovans know—" he began.

But at that moment a voice said: "O there you are!"

They all swung round. It was Nancy. She was overjoyed to see them again, and soon all were seated talking. Judge Davenport, after a brief chat with the girl, took his departure. It was not until another hour or more had passed that John hurried off to the Rossland.

"Shall I see you to-morrow?" he asked Nancy as he grasped her hand.

She shook her head.

"We go back early," she replied. "But come out and see us. We'd love to have you."

He shook hands with James, who warmly seconded the invitation, then turned away.

"I'll walk a bit with you," said the Wolfer.

Outside they strolled quietly along for a spell, each deep in thought. Then said the Wolfer:

"You're crazy about her."

John flushed.

"About who?" he asked.

The Wolfer ignored that reply.

"I say," he said, "I'm something of a psychologist, think-ologist, puzzle-ologist. I just came out with you to ask why, when you knew Nancy was in town, you made that remark to

her father about her being alone at Mac-Intyre's."

John did not answer at once.

"Well, I just wanted to mention her, to ask for her," he said at last.

"But why that way? That's what puzzles me."

"I didn't want to look as if I— O well, I don't know why I did."

"I'll tell you why," said the Wolfer, "though I can't explain all. You're in love. People interest me. They do things like that, like what you did. They seem often not to be direct when it's just as easy to be direct. With you it's a symptom; I know that; but I thought you might be able to explain just why you did it."

"I really can't. I agree it was silly."

"O well, I'll have to think out why you did myself. Anyhow, you're crazy about her. She was in your head in your fever away up above timber-level, and she's in your head here where the timber is all side-walks and houses."

"Are you—are you in love with her?" asked John.

"You are not poaching on my preserves," replied the Wolfer. "I in love! I love her, but only as I love many people. But I'm not crazy about any woman. I'm too much of a

wanderer to settle down. All right, I'll have to think out the problem of your mind for myself. So-long. See you in the morning."

He turned and walked back toward the Tremont.

"Queer fellow!" thought John.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BACK IN THE SACRED PARLOUR

WITH Ma and Prop Donovan John talked till after midnight; and as he talked it came to him suddenly, sitting there with them and feeling very fond of them, that he must look much like a son come home to them. Just as that thought passed through his mind Ma said:

“You’ve had a rough time, but you’ve won through. I’m surely glad. Do you know why I was so eager for Prop to think up some job for you? I’ll just tell you: if our boy had lived he’d have been very like you. O you’re sure like him. But I never thought Prop’s mind would go thinking on the lines it did. I said: ‘Can’t you help rustle him a job?’ I didn’t ask him to think up some scheme that might turn you into a crazy person! It must have been terrible up there with Larry like that. No, not in mine. I’m happier to home where there are side-walks and you can switch on the electric light. No wilds for me! No creeks for me hollerin’ through the hills. Give me running hot and cold water.”

Donovan heaved himself up in his chair.

"It seems," said he, "as if I did what you wanted. He has a little wad of bills coming to him now. It's an awful world. Can't get along without them dirty little bits of paper."

As soon as Prop began to talk in that fashion Ma fidgeted, wondered if the stove needed replenishing, or wanted a window shut or a window open. They seemed very fond of each other and yet also appeared to bore each other. She looked at the clock.

"O look at the time!" she exclaimed. "Half-after one! Half-after one! Good-night!"

She rose, laughed gaily, and tapping John on the shoulder went from the room. Donovan sat a moment staring before him, and then he glanced at the door.

"She's a peach," said he.

John's gaze was also distant—upon a vision of Nancy James. Well, he must not feel like that. It was unfair to the Wolfer—for John still had a shrewd suspicion that Walt was in love with Nancy, notwithstanding his asseveration that he was not. It was too vehement. It made John recall: "Methinks she doth protest too much!"

"Spokeshave!" as Bunt would have said, to the Wolfer's disgust.

Prop Donovan sucked on the butt of his cigar. It was out.

“Gosh!” he said.

“What?”

“There is no doubt that Ma likes you. Look here, I bin smoking my cigar in this parlour and she never noticed, so taken up with your coming back. Now that’s proof. Yes, you do look oddly like the kid too. That tarnation war! You are sure like him in feature. He was killed in the war that that fellow in the fireman’s helmet and with the waxed moustache set agoing. And we had no souvenirs of him at all. Then she come on those little old shoes in an old box; and there they be now. I think it is kind of morbid having them there, but she likes it. ‘It’s all we have to remember him by,’ she says. I’ve got him right here,” and he clapped his great heavy chest, then stuck the cigar butt in his mouth and pouted his lips round it. “O well, O well!” He rose abruptly. “To bed, to bed. Time for retiring.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WOLFER LOOKS AT A MAP

IN the morning John wakened as early as he had been accustomed to waking in the mountain camps. But Jaffery was a typical wide-awake western mountain town, despite its last census of but four thousand. The telephone exchange did not sleep. He rang up the Occidental and asked if Mr. Walter Dewar had registered there. A voice replied in the negative. He rang up the Tremont, and there repeated his enquiry, and a sleepy voice (probably of the night clerk looking forward to being relieved, to his morning supper and his forenoon's sleep) said:

"Yes, he's registered here. Want to speak to him?"

"If it's not too early."

"He's right here. Hold the line."

And then came the Wolfer's voice:
"Hullo?"

"Hullo," said John.

"O it's you, John" answered the Wolfer.

"Yes, it's me—or I should say, it's I."

He heard the Wolfer chuckle.

"Feeling good this morning, John?"

"Yes," said John. "How did you know it was I?"

"By the voice, of course."

"You have an ear for voices on the 'phone."

"You bet I have! Come round and eat breakfast here. Bunt is just coming down. I want to get some things attended to. To quote the words of Emerson when he had to leave a party where they were talking about things that mattered, and go out and take a tally of a rig of hay: 'We must attend to these things just as if they were real.' "

"I know the things you mean. They were real, alas."

"They don't fizz on me. Call it a dream—and forget. If we aren't allowed to live without pulling our guns I suppose we must knuckle to Destiny, and slam 'em down—slam 'em down drunk or sober, so to speak!"

"All right. I'll be round."

"All right. So-long."

By the time John reached the Tremont, Bunt had joined the Wolfer in the rotunda, and the three went into the dining-room together. Breakfast over they walked across to the livery-stable, where Bunt and Walt procured an assortment of samples of the ore, talked to the

horses a spell, stood and looked at them as men who care for horses will, and then they went to Fred Stand's assay office.

Fred was sitting in the little rear room, smoking a cigarette which made him seem comic; it was so small a smoke for such a large fat man. He looked at the ore and then at the Wolfer.

"Have I seen this before?" he asked.

"I hope so," said the Wolfer.

"By gosh, it's not—it's not—" he looked up at them, cigarette hanging from mouth corner, blinking his eyes, the smoke in them.

"I guess it will be good enough," said Bunt.

"All right." Fred Stand gave a knowing inclination of his head. "I'll see what's to it for you."

They then passed on to the land registry office and entered, to find only a coloured gentleman doing a little light work with a feather duster over a roll-top desk.

"When does this office open?" asked the Wolfer.

"It's open, sah, but you are a little too precious for transaction of business."

He glanced at the clock; and as he considered it the door swung behind them, and Cromarty, the registrar, strolled in, carrying the Jaffery *Argus*, gold pince-nez on the end of his nose, for he was of that type—one of those tubby and

florid little men who read looking down through pince-nez on nose tip and look up over them when walking, head a little lowered. He looked as if he still had his pre-lunch cock-tail, his post-prandial tot with the coffee.

"Gentlemen to see you, sah," announced the porter.

Cromarty lowered his head and looked at them over the nose-tipped eye-glasses.

"All together?" he asked half of his porter, half of them.

"All the one round-up," said Bunt.

"Step this way," said Cromarty.

They passed into a room on the walls of which were big maps with squares all over them. Maps! Maps with the red streak running over them of roads, or dotted red of trails.

The Wolfer stood before one, following up the lines of dotted red. There was his passion. The dotted red trails! It seemed he had forgotten manners because of a map. Bunt had to speak three times to him, calling him by name, before he could attract his attention to the registering of their great mineral claim, head-waters MacIntyre Creek and Lincoln Creek, on divide five hundred yards from rise of small fork tributary to MacIntyre, etc., etc.

When they passed out into the street again the Good Enough was theirs with full under-

standing of tenure and assessment work required for holding. Bunt knew all about that formula already.

"You'll have to put in the assessment work, Bunt," said the Wolfer, "you and John. Take wages for that out of my share, and as stiff wages as you like! Nothing will lure me into mole work. I'm one with the grasshoppers! I can't go probing and drilling and shooting off dynamite in holes like a crazy kind of man-gopher. What a dandy map that was of the trails in this state. I could have marked them in a few more, but it is good to know what trails are shown on the government people's maps, and what ones are out of their ken. If a man wants to get away any time—" he left the rest unspoken.

"Going to frame up another hold-up?" asked Bunt.

The Wolfer did not reply. He just fingered the under side of his chin, projecting himself slowly along the side-walk.

"And now," he said, "I suppose the next step is to go and make a report. Sheriff Bow told me to look around at the Court House in the forenoon."

"Us to come too?"

"Yep."

"Suppose they just arrest us?"

"We're only to make a report of the attempt to hold us up while we were in the hills, to show that we are reputable citizens. The law listens, and says, 'Thank you. What will your address be, please, in case we wish to communicate with you?' We are not supposed to know that Bow has been out already and investigated."

"Well, what do you know about that!" exclaimed Bunt. "And he'll get the credit of arresting these two gun-men all on his little lonesome."

To the Wolfer that possibility seemed trifling. He laughed and led the way to the Court House. That ceremony, or formality of honourable men over, they came into the street again where Bunt blew a breath of relief.

"I don't feel to home in a court house," said he. "It's too near related to the jail. After all these perambulations let's go and eat early lunch. We had an early breakfast."

Half-way through lunch a page-boy marched into the dining-room.

"Dewar!" he called. "Mr. Dewar!"

"Who's paging you now, Walt?" asked Bunt.

The Wolfer rose, and tilting forward his chair left them. When he returned he looked extremely pleased.

"Fred Stand on the telephone," he said.
"He says it's good enough."

"It is!"

"Yep. Good enough. That's all he said."

"Mr. Dewar! Mr. Walter Dewar!" called the page again.

"I seem to be in demand," said the Wolfer, and went out once more.

Returning he sat down and sighed, and very slowly, and very carefully, put his napkin over his knees.

"It was Judge Davenport that time to inform me that a little bird has told him something, and I asked him what it was that a little bird had told him. He then said he was in Stand's office with a friend, name of Prothero, and saw the assay card, and wants us to meet this particular friend. He'll 'phone later and fix it up."

"Prothero!" exclaimed Bunt.

"Why that accent?" asked the Wolfer.

Bunt held up the morning *Argus*.

"Why man," he said, "he's the king-bolt of the Columbia and Oregon River Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company. He's in town looking for a good thing."

"I never read the papers," said the Wolfer.

They went out into the rotunda and there sat down in a corner within hearing of any further

possible call from the page-boy. There Bunt left John and the Wolfer, to rove round, read the announcements on the various boards, glance at the pamphlets in hanging-boxes, try his luck at a punch-board, last vestige of gambling allowed in the state, wander along the coloured rows of magazines festooned on a wall behind the news-stand like a Joseph's coat washing on a line.

"What," enquired the Wolfer, turning to John, "will you do if you get the nucleus of a little fortune out of this?"

John considered, gazing before him.

"Heavens, man!" said the Wolfer. "Surely you have tastes. Surely you know what you'll do? Bunt knows what he will do—or I should say what he won't do. He'll do nothing till it is gone, and he'll do his best to make it fly. I know what I'll do. I'll go see more of the world, places where a white man does not work, where it's taboo. I'll be a darn tourist till I'm tired of touring, and longing again for the smell of horses and the creak of the high-saddle. That's me. Man, you're blushing! You're going to make a stereotyped end!"

He rose laughing, a chuckling laugh, and strolled over to the cigar-stand to shake the dice for cigars with the clerk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PROTHERO MAKES AN OFFER

THE great Prothero was a meagre little man who seemed made chiefly of springs, with eyes as bright as a blue-jay's. He looked like a bird too, standing in the middle of Judge Davenport's room above the City Hall, hands behind back, coat-tails out-thrust over his hands.

Davenport greeted all three as they were ushered in by a girl in a low-cut georgette blouse, and a high-cut silk skirt, that made her look as if ready for the Highland fling. The roll of her bright eye upon Bunt went through him like an electric shock. He chucked his chest and strutted past her bowing, hat in hand. He was like Jack ashore. He was what is called "susceptible." The Wolfer saw and his spectacles twinkled. Then his face went grave, pensive, as they entered.

The judge came forward. "Mr. Prothero, meet Mr. Dewar, Mr. Bradley, and Mr.—er—Fiske."

They bowed, and hesitated, and then shook

hands, while the judge fussed to and fro, thrusting seats towards them. Then he spoke.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said, “where to begin? Yes, this is where to begin. You know I am interested in our state, and wholeheartedly interested in our little city. I tell you this by way of apology in case it seems I’ve been butting in. I was in Fred Stand’s office when he was working on your assay. He’ll be sending you the card of it soon. Well, I’ve seen it—and it is good enough. We’ll make no bones about it. Mr. Prothero knows the story. I wrote to him a while back about the sad death of poor old Bush, and what sort of stuff he brought back. I wanted him to come right in and go look for himself.”

“Sorry I didn’t now,” said Prothero.

“Well, that brings me to the part where I can, so to speak, vacate the chair,” and the judge smiled. “Mr. Prothero is just passing through here, and as I heard a rumour of what you fellows had been after, I slipped into Stand’s to hear a little more about it. I want to be able to make Mr. Prothero see that Jaffery is worth his while. It will mean a whole lot to the town to have a big mine running back in the hills. And now I’ll let Mr. Prothero say his piece to you.”

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Prothero bobbed up in his chair as if on springs, his head jerked forward.

"Well, gentlemen," said he, "you know of course that in the old days it was quite common for a big company like mine to buy a claim, such as you have, outright. The prospector looked for a big figure for a high-grade prospect when the assessment work showed well. In recent years, as I have no doubt you know too, all that has been changed. We will lease a proposition and see what we can make of it, lease it for a period of years, and with the option of a renewal. All right. It's a square proposition. If the stuff is there we get it, and the prospector not only has our lease paid but his claim is being developed. But it is conceivable that there are times when the old way is still the better way."

The Wolfer nodded slowly, in agreement with that doctrine.

"Well, you've got an unusual prospect, or so it seems. Now I want on behalf of my company not to lease it from you, but to buy outright according to the old custom that has recently fallen into desuetude."

"How's that?" said Bunt, not understanding. The Wolfer glanced at him.

"It's all right," he said.

"Oh! All right," said Bunt.

Prothero looked at the Wolfer and, meeting his eyes, noted a flicker of a smile in them, come and gone like a twinkle of light in the glasses of his big spectacles.

"Of course," he said, straightening his mouth, which had for a moment twitched up at a corner, "I'd want to go and examine the claim and not only the claim. I'd have to estimate transport expenses, see what the facilities are."

Bunt looked at him shrewdly. The Wolfer bowed.

"Certainly," he said. "You wouldn't buy a pig in a poke."

"Well, all I want you to promise is that you will not speak to any one else about it yet. Let me have first refusal or offer anyhow."

The Wolfer glanced at his two friends, raising his brows, and then turned to Prothero.

"Quite agreeable," he said.

"Can you fix up for us to go out now?" asked Prothero.

Walter felt his chin's underside and turned to Fiske.

"You don't want to go back, I suppose?" he said.

"Well, I would if you wanted me to," said John.

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"It was a heck of a trip, then?" enquired Prothero.

His easier language put Bunt suddenly at ease.

"See here," he said to the Wolfer, "you don't want to go. You're just pining to get out of the mountains and back to the bald-headed prairie."

The Wolfer thought that over.

"The fun is over, you see," he replied.

But Prothero did not imagine, despite that remark, that he could have the purchase for a song.

"I'll go up with you," said Bunt. "I'll go so long as you cut out the high-brow words and talk so I can understand. Walt is the high-brow of our outfit. Him and me—high-brow and low-brow—we are sure a combine all the same."

"Well, that's fine," said the Wolfer. "You see, Mr. Prothero, I have a big bunch of horses I've been using here in connection with some government topographical work, and I want to get them over the divide before the snow lies there."

"You could ship them by train from Eagle Bend so far as that goes," said Davenport. "You'll have enough to pay the freight charges

if you sell the prospect," he added with a chuckle.

"O he wants to go ambling through the mountains singing 'The Holbrook Trail,' and musing upon John Muir and Burroughs, and the blue-jays and—if he gets stuck—the snow-birds," said Bunt Bradley. "Let him go his own way. He'll go anyhow."

So it was arranged that Bunt should get supplies and horses and have all ready on the morrow. Then they came out into the street again.

"We'd better get over to the stables, then," said the Wolfer, "and just select the horses you'll want, Bunt, and figure out chuck. How did you know so well I was just longing to get back to the plains?"

"Because I know you," answered Bunt. "I ain't a great hand on long words; I ain't a college man; but I know a whole lot about your make-up."

The Wolfer looked at John and laughed.

"He's been psychologizing me," he said; and they strolled into the livery-stable.

CHAPTER THIRTY

JOHN'S HORSE TURNS BACK

IT was one of these wonderful days of the late Autumn. To be in the saddle riding up the slopes was good. The sun was warm, and down in the valley where Jaffery lay John noted a blue dragon-fly shuttling to and fro over a fence before one of the bungalow homes that make the little town so pretty a place. Leaves of birch and cottonwood were still on the trees in the valley, but just above the last strip of side-walk and round the dairy-ranches the birches were skeletonizing ready for winter. A day or two makes a marked change at that season of the year. Clumps of larches—tamaracks—among the firs were like thin etched lines.

The Wolfer's horse-string jig-jogged uphill. Behind came the riders: the Wolfer and John, Mr. Prothero and Bunt. Behind again were other pack-horses laden for the trip to the headwaters of MacIntyre Creek, that wild divide where the marmots whistle and the rock-slides rumble. John rode a horse that was the property of the livery-stable as he was only, in

Bunt's phrase, "putting them a bit on the way."

They made but a brief halt for lunch, and when that was over Fiske knew he must turn back. A little further on Prothero and Bunt would go west into the old placer-camp trail, but the Wolfer would hold on up the Seven-Up road and then swing away to east, between the sheer notched summits that peered over the near hog-backs. There John rendered his last assistance to them, helping the Wolfer to keep his string of ponies from heading off with the pack-horses that were to go with Bunt.

The latter drove his on. Prothero waved a hand to Jack and followed. Bunt fell behind for a few moments.

"So-long, Jack," he said. "Take care of yourself till we meet again." And then: "Well, Walt, you spectacted long-nosed Wolfer," and he smiled gaily, "safe trip to you to Big Prairie. If you don't come back to Jaffery I'll see you again on the plains some day."

They shook hands.

"I wish you were coming with me now," he went on. "You got the savvy for the high-brow stuff. Now and then, when Mr. Prothero is talking, I want to ask him to whistle instead

so's to see if I'd understand him better that way. So-long, you old son of a gun."

He rode on.

The Wolfer and Jack were busy holding the more eager of the remaining horses that wanted to march on, till Bunt had disappeared round the next bend. All the while they did not speak; and then, though the Wolfer looked as though he had something to say, he was still quiet. He fingered his chin.

"Well, so-long just now, John," he said at last. "I don't know when I'll see you again."

"But don't you mean to come back to Jaffery as soon as you've got the horses to Big Prairie?"

The Wolfer shook his head.

"I think I'm better moving," he said. "And say—you're likely to get lonesome in Jaffery, kicking your heels there, swinging a leg. You'll very likely put in a day or two running down to MacIntyre's, and you'll maybe see Nancy in town. I've a hunch that the quest for the Good Enough has to have a stereotyped ending. I feel it in my bones. I read it in the light on your face like a darn' halo when you see her. Well, you're good enough too. That's a lot for me to say, John. I've known her since she was knee-high to a grasshopper."

He slapped a hand down on John's shoulder and pressed it, then gave his shrill whistle to the pack-string. Up went their heads.

John felt a lump in his throat. His "So-long!" had a gulping sound. Away went the cavalcade. He watched them and heard the Wolfer's voice raised up singing a song of Knibbs to an air of an older cattle-song: "Git along, cayuse, git along." For a moment he wanted to ride after the Wolfer and say: "Let me come with you. Why shouldn't I? Why should I stay in Jaffery?"

He hesitated. His horse wondered what was expected of it and fidgeted. In fidgeting it turned about, heading toward town. John gave a click to it, and with a toss of its head it set off down hill again, content, homeward bound.

EPILOGUE

But the reader need not “kick his heels” or “swing a leg” metaphorically any longer. The quest for the Good Enough is over; the tale is almost told.

The Columbia and Oregon River Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company is building a concentrator (as we go to press, so to speak) at the old placer-camp. Once again the woods there echo with the sound of man’s labours. For Prothero bought. The sum? It was a sum to match the outright purchase sums for the best prospects of the old days. It ran into five figures—for each of them.

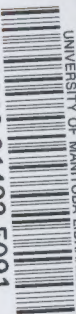
The Wolfer said he foresaw a stereotyped end to the story, and he was right. Regarding that other matter, the matter of wedding-bells, it has to be told that they will shortly ring for John Fiske and Nancy James. And some, hearing of the cable the Wolfer sent to John on receipt of that news—“My love to you both. Be good to her”—may surmise the hint of another kind of story, the story of a man born too early and a maid too late. (“I

knew her when she was knee-high to a grasshopper.”) That cable, by the way, came from Essequibo where the Wolfer had made a halt in his seeing of the world so that his mail might find him.

But the austere mountains do not care for sentiment it seems. A halt—a halt! What was it Thackeray said? *Put the puppets away in the box.* Something to that effect, it was. There they go, then; and the curtain comes down; and the painting on that curtain, what is it? It is a picture of a plain that goes rolling up into foothills, and beyond the foothills great slopes of mid-mountain clothed with fir, pine, and the stately tamarack; and higher again the white wedges of the glaciers, and the sheer jagged crests that live with the stars and the cloudbursts. Not all the blasting for precious ore can change these contours.

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